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Captain Crimson, THE MAN OF THE IRON FACE;

OR,

The Nemesis of the Plains.

A Romance of Love and Adventure in
the "Land of the Setting Sun."

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KING," "DASHING DANDY, THE HOTSPUR
OF THE HILLS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAGEDY.

It is moonlight on the prairie!

The moon sails upward into the blue depths of
heaven's dome, and casts a silvery radiance
upon the prairie ocean beneath her—a vast ex-
panse of rolling land, covered with long grass,

that is fanned by the evening breeze into waves
that look like the billows of the sea.

The chirping of numberless insects, trilling
notes of gladness to the mellow beams that in-
vade their grassy retreat, and the distant
howl of a prowling wolf alone break the still-
ness of the night, and nature seems asleep, so
deathlike is the hush that rests upon the scene.

And yet this immense solitude rests not long
without its repose being broken, for far away
appears a horseman, coming at an easy gallop
over the plain, and following the trail that
winds across the prairie, until it disappears
amid a range of hills that rise in fantastic
shapes in the westward.

Though in a land where the Indian's war-
whoop is oftener heard than the crack of the
teamster's whip, the horseman is a white man,
as seen by his brow and sun-bronzed cheeks,
for a long brown beard covers his face, conceal-
ing the lower features.

And yet his face is one to remember, for the
eyes are a marvel of beauty, the forehead high
and intelligent, and a wealth of dark curls
cluster around his head and fall upon his neck.

A tall, well-formed man, with a physique of
iron, and a face that would command admi-
ration in any gathering, he looked out of place
in a buckskin suit, broad sombrero, and armed
like a desperado, in that wild prairie scene.

With his eyes fastened on the trail ahead, he
urges his horse onward, although the animal
has shown signs of fatigue for the past ten miles.

Ascending a roll in the prairie he suddenly
halts, and quickly rides back behind the rolling
slope, for his eyes had caught sight of two
horsemen, half a mile distant, just emerging
from a small "timber island," or motte, through
which the trail ran.

"By Heaven! they reached the motte ahead
of me; but this rise will do, though I must take
him at long range; but when did I ever miss at
long or short range?"

The latter words came grimly from his
bearded lips, and dismounting he turned his
horse loose, to feed upon the rich grass, and
then cautiously ascended the rise, until his head
was on a level with the top.

"It must be they, for the scout I saw back at
the Post, said they were not half a day's jour-



TWO SHARP REPORTS FOLLOWED, AND THE TWO RED-SKIN GUARDS DROPPED DEAD IN THEIR TRACKS.

ney behind him," he muttered, at the same time bringing his rifle around ready for use, and examining it with the air of one whose life hung upon its trustfulness.

"It is strange they do not camp in the motte," he muttered; and then added: "I suppose he is too anxious to get back with his precious news about my past life for his sweet sister's ear; but, those who wait his coming will wait in vain, for this night he becomes food for the prairie coyote, and to-morrow the vultures will flap their loathsome wings above his mangled form."

And as he gave expression to his bitter feelings, the two horsemen drew nearer and nearer the rise, beyond which lay the deadly ambush, little dreaming as they rode along of the crouching form, cruel face and leveled rifle the tall grass concealed.

Presently a clear tenor voice broke forth in song:

"Do they miss me at home, do they miss me?
'Twould be an assurance most dear,
To know at this moment some loved one
Were saying 'I wish he were here.'"

"Better not holler, Massa Harold, kase we hain't out o' de woods yit," warned the companion of the singer, and he added: "Dem beast of Injuns I guesses isn't fur away."

"Oh yes, Jack, we have left all danger behind us, and the Post is not many miles distant; besides, I feel like singing, as I have accomplished what I came to Texas for," and he added, in a low tone, "Nina shall never marry Harvey Vertner."

"Glad of it, I is, Massa Harold; so ef yer feels like it, jist sing away, only let it be some-thin' doleful, for singin' is like prayin', sah, at times, an' ther Lord might lend His ear and take it for a pra'er, so he might, an' keep them durn Injuns away; I has awful faith in pra'er, Massa Harold, whether yer sing or speak it."

"All right, Jack, I'll sing something doleful," answered the young man, with a light laugh, and he broke forth again in his fine rich voice, with the Prison Song from *Trovatore*:

"Ah! I have sighed to rest me
Deep in the quiet grave,"—

"Oh, God!"

The last two words broke in a cry from his lips, and mingled with the sharp crack of a rifle, while with arms stretched forth and grasping wildly at the empty air, he fell from his saddle upon the grass-covered prairie, while his frightened steed darted madly away.

Throwing himself from his own horse, with a muttered curse and cry of sorrow commingled, the faithful negro knelt by the side of his young master, who lay prone upon his back, his white, pale face turned up to the moonlight, and no throbbing of the heart, no beating of the pulse to tell that he yet lived, but a red wound in his side showing where the deadly bullet had torn its way in search of the seat of life.

"Oh, Lordy! Lordy! have marcy on dis poor chile! Oh, Lordy God in hebbel! have marcy 'pon dis poor nigger, for my young massa am dead, dead, dead!" and with a wail of anguish the poor negro rocked to and fro, forgetting his own danger in his deep grief for his slain master.

And, back over the trail, a grim, triumphant light in his face, rode the assassin, driving his cruel spurs into the flanks of his straining steed, until he flew like the wind from the scene of the fatal ambush amid the flower-bespangled grass of the moonlit prairie, that now presented a picture of sorrow and of gloom.

CHAPTER II.

FOR WEAL OR FOR WOE.

FROM the flower-bespangled prairies of Texas, to the orange and magnolia groves of sunny Louisiana, I would have my kind readers accompany me, that I may present to them, per medium of my pen, the characters that will figure most prominently in this, my "ower true tale."

Upon the banks of one of those limpid streams that glide through the "sugar lands" of the Creole State, dwelt some years ago Major Burt Malcolm, an ex-army officer who had won distinction on the battle-fields of Mexico, but who had

"Beaten his sword into a plowshare,"

figuratively speaking, and turned planter on the vast estate he had inherited from his forefathers.

His plantation home of Woodland Rest was a grand old mansion, the surrounding families ever finding hospitable welcome there. Besides his wife, and son, a handsome, dashing young man of twenty-four, the major's family consisted of his daughter Nina, a maiden of rare loveliness, who had but just crossed the threshold of womanhood, her sister Maud, a little beauty of fourteen, and Violet Vassar, of the same age, and a niece of Mrs. Malcolm.

But over Woodland Rest hovered oneshadow, that often cast a gloom over the happy hearthstone, for Major Malcolm possessed a besetting sin—the habit of gambling.

More than once he had brought himself and family to the verge of ruin in one night over the card-table; but back again, just in the nick

of time, would fly the fickle Goddess of Luck, and he would be saved, until the mania, for such it seemed, again seized him to risk his all upon the turn of a piece of printed pasteboard.

A few weeks before the reader will be invited to a gala gathering at Woodland Rest, Major Malcolm had been returning home with fifty thousand dollars in his pocket, the proceeds of a sale of property in Tennessee, and tempted by a noted river gambler on the steamer, he had played and lost all—ay, more, as the story will develop, and had returned to his estate with a deep sorrow in his heart, and a presentiment of coming evil, for, to gain back his losses he had recklessly continued playing, until in desperation he had pledged to Kent Conrad, the "King of Diamonds," the hand of his daughter, not for himself, but for another, the gambler's friend, Harvey Vertner, a retired army officer, whose wild life in New Orleans had caused universal comment, even in that gay city.

He had before refused Captain Vertner's offer of marriage, though he knew that Nina loved him. Half a year before he had met her in the Crescent City, where she was the reigning belle, whenever she deigned to set her dainty foot in New Orleans, and, fascinated by her beauty, Harvey Vertner had become her very slave, even following her back to her plantation home.

A man of strange fascinations, he was yet a man whom all dreaded:—why, they could not tell, and even Nina was a little afraid of him; but, unheeding the mysterious whisperings regarding his past life, she loved on, and gave him her heart, though her father refused him her hand.

For awhile matters stood thus, and Harvey Vertner came no more to Woodland Rest; but a few days after the return of Major Malcolm from Tennessee, and the departure of his son for Texas, the captain put in an appearance at the plantation, received a formal welcome from its master, but left soon after with the promise that Nina should become his wife within the month.

To the intended bride the days flew swiftly by, as she prepared her elegant *trousseau*; but to the anxious father, who kept the dread secret he held from his wife, the days were long and drear, and he anxiously yearned for the coming of Harold, with tidings that would send Harvey Vertner in disgrace from the house, for he would say over and over again:

"The antipathy I have for that man increases day by day, and I would rather lose all I am worth than see Nina become his bride; but I have pledged my word, and never yet have I broken it."

At length the thirty days drew near the end, and Harold came not and in despair Major Malcolm wrote to the King of Diamonds, begging a delay of two weeks, as he wished his son's presence at the wedding.

A polite note was the answer from Kent Conrad, and one from Harvey Vertner, granting the delay.

But alas! those two weeks rolled by, and the planter could ask no more time, while he had to account for his son's absence by saying he had gone West, and would not be able to return; but most anxious did he feel regarding him, as no word had come from Harold since his departure.

And thus it is that Woodland Rest is a scene of gayety, for the time given has passed, and the evening of the wedding has come.

At length, over the gay throng gathered there falls a hush, for the bride, radiant in her beauty, though pale and trembling, enters the vast parlor leaning upon her father's arm, while behind follow her mother and the happy bridegroom.

The clergyman stands at one end, prayer-book in hand, and before him they halt, and the ceremony begins.

At length he pauses, and glancing over the throng, asks the momentous question:

"If there be any one present who can show just cause why this man and this woman shall not be joined together in the holy bonds of matrimony, let him step forth and confess it, or forever after hold his peace!"

Over the sea of faces Harvey Vertner cast his brilliant eyes, and in them dwelt a look of triumph, while the clergyman remained silent for what seemed an age.

But no voice of protest arose, and a sigh came from the lips of Burt Malcolm, whose eyes eagerly watched the door, as though hoping to see his son appear; no one came to warn, and the last words were said, and warm congratulations followed.

Separating himself from the throng, Harvey Vertner beckoned to Major Malcolm, and the two entered the library together, the latter locking the door after them.

"Major Malcolm, I have here an important package to deliver to you, sir, the contents of which you doubtless know," said Captain Vertner, taking from his pocket a sealed envelope of papers.

Breaking the seal the major saw at a glance that his notes were there, a draft on a New Orleans bank for fifty thousand dollars, and the written pledge he had given Kent Conrad, the

King of Diamonds, regarding the sacrifice of his daughter, for such he called it.

"May I ask if you know the contents of this sealed package, sir?" asked the major, fixing his eyes upon the face of his son-in-law.

"I do, sir."

"Ah! then Kent Conrad the gambler informed you how it was I gave my consent that you should marry my daughter?"

"Yes, I know all; and, Major Malcolm, I have a secret to confess, but I do so, only upon your promise not to betray me."

The major started and looked with surprise at Harvey Vertner, who asked:

"Do you give your promise that it shall remain a secret between us?"

"Does it concern my daughter's happiness, sir?"

"Yes, Major Malcolm, and mine, too, far more than you can imagine," answered Captain Vertner, earnestly.

"Then I pledge you my word, sir."

"Enough! I know how sacredly you hold it; now let me tell you that I have deceived you—"

"Sir!"

"Show no anger, but listen, I met your daughter one day in the streets of New Orleans, and her beauty and purity of face won my heart, and I determined to know her; but, did I seek her as the world knew me, I would win her contempt; so I sought a disguise—"

"Captain Vertner, this—"

"Stay! hear me, and let my devoted love for your daughter be my only palliation. Until a year ago I always wore a heavy beard, but then I shaved it off, for reasons not necessary to explain."

"That beard I kept, strange to say, and going to a Parisian hair-dresser, lately settled in New Orleans, I offered him a thousand dollars to make me a beard that no one would believe was false, and he did so, as you see, sir."

"By Heaven! have you dared marry my daughter with a mask on your face, Harvey Vertner?" cried the major, his eyes flashing; but with utmost coolness the captain replied:

"You shall hear all, sir. In the army I was poor, but, discovering that I was possessed of marvelous luck in all I undertook, I turned it to use, studied cards, and—"

"Holy Heaven! you are the Diamond King!"

The words were gasped, rather than said, but, unheeding the excitement of his newly-made father-in-law, the captain answered:

"Yes, sir, I am Kent Conrad; the name I was given by my parents; but my uncle, who got me an appointment to West Point, induced me to change my name to his, which was Harvey Vertner, and by that I was known in the army, by the other I am known as a gambler, and you alone, sir, know my secret."

"And this is the secret you have made me give a pledge to keep, sir?"

"It is; your daughter leaves here with me to-morrow, and we shall not return, at least until Kent Conrad is forgotten, and by pretending to shave my beard off, Nina will not know me, as she does not remember to have met the Diamond King, while, by growing a mustache, Kenton Conrad's face will be disguised, and none need be the wiser, but you I tell, as you kept your word with me so nobly, and thereby made me the happiest of men."

Major Malcolm paced the room several times to and fro, his brow clouded; but at length he said:

"Captain Vertner, I will not betray you, for I have given my word, and because, too, the secret would break poor Nina's heart, and you seem sincere in your love for her."

"That I distrusted you, I admit; and had I cause of complaint that I could have found out, I would have let my fortune go, and saved my daughter."

"And frankly I tell you, that my son Harold is now away, endeavoring to find some cause of censure against you that would have prevented the marriage this night."

"He will never return with one word against my character, sir. Am I forgiven, and will you take my hand?" and the gambler smiled in his pleasant way.

"Yes, for I cannot do otherwise; but, for the love of God, Vertner, bring no sorrow upon my child," and the major grasped the outstretched hand, little dreaming that its touch upon the trigger had sent a bullet, only several weeks before, at the heart of Harold Malcolm—and the same hand it was that Nina had clasped that night to guide her through life!

CHAPTER III.

THE DOUBLE STROKE.

THE morning after the Woodland Rest wedding broke bright and beautiful, the mocking-birds sung serenades in the trees, and it seemed as if Nina had stepped across the threshold of a life that would never know a sorrow.

At length the steamer arrived that was to bear the young bride away to her new home, which was to be in the far North, the captain said; farewells were spoken with tears in hearts and eyes, and away from the hearthstone of her girlhood went the wife—little knowing what shadows lay in her path in the great beyond.

A few days more went by, and a hush like

death's presence brings seemed to rest upon the inmates of Woodland mansion, for all felt the absence of the bride, and the coming not of the young master, and a look of anxiety settled upon the father's brow.

One day he slowly paced the library, waiting, hoping, wondering, and there was a rap at his door, and in came a tottering form, that fell on his knees, and wailed forth:

"Oh, massa! massa! he am gone, he am gone!"

It was Jack, Harold's body-servant, and his black face was haggard, his form emaciated, his eyes sunken, while his clothing was tattered and travel-stained.

The strong man tottered to a chair and sunk into it, for in that black face he read his son's fate, and from his pallid lips came the word:

"Dead?"

"Yas, massa, he am dead."

"My poor, noble boy dead? Oh, Jack! tell me all, for the love of God!"

"I will, massa, for my heart am a'most breakin' wid de story, an' my eyes has run tears until de fount'ins have dried up, for poor Massa Harold were a noble man, an' he didn't deserve ter die by de Injuns' hand."

"Indians! did the Indians kill my boy?"

"Yas, massa; we was nigh-most home, sah, an' it were a beautiful night on de pararer, an' Massa Harold were singin', for he said he'd accomplished what he went to Texas for, an' jist den dere came a shot from de grass, an' young massa fell from his horse on de pararer, an' Reindeer run away, an' so did my coward horse, and leave me all alone wid poor Massa Harold."

"My poor, noble son; to meet such a death and at the hand of savages! The blow will break his mother's heart, I fear."

"Yas, massa, it am a ter'ible stroke for de good Lord to gib widout warnin'; but, sah, I forgot dat I was in danger, an' I carried Massa Harold in my arms back to a piece ob timberland, and dere I dug a grave wid my knife to bury him; but I heerd de Injuns comin', an' I had ter run away, massa."

"But I took his watch, and money, and ring, massa, an' here dey am, for I didn't spen' none, as I beg somethin' to eat as I come along, an' I couldn't catch dem horses nobow I try, for dey run all over de pararer, massa, so I walked all de way home, an' I rather have died, dan tell you de story I has."

"My noble Jack, you have indeed been faithful, and from my heart I thank you, and grasp your hands, the hands that dug my poor boy's grave, in friendship," and the planter took the hands of the negro in both his own, and telling him to go and get food and then seek rest, went slowly to his wife's room, to bear to her heart the grief that was in his own.

And that day upon Woodland Rest fell shadows which the bright sunlight could ne'er drive away, for the master became nervous and fretful, sought excitement in city life, and soon after found the gaming-table his only panacea for driving away sad thoughts, and fearful forebodings of evil, for months had gone by since the departure of Nina, and not a word had come from her to her parents.

Driven to desperation by bitter thoughts, Burt Malcolm plunged deeper and deeper into the fascinations of the gaming-table, though each day he knew he became poorer and poorer in worldly wealth; but he could not, dared not shake off the spell upon him, until at last poverty almost stared him in the face, and he realized how he had dragged his family down to the verge of want.

And then on him was another sorrow, one that silvered his dark hair, and almost made his reason totter on its throne; for there came one who sought Harvey Vertner, and told the story of his past life—of a deserted wife; a murdered officer, his superior in rank, and the crime having been traced to him; in fact, many an evil deed was laid at his door, several of them sufficient to bring him to the gallows.

And poor Nina! what of her, and whither had she wandered, or did she still cling to the base man who had so cruelly wrecked her young life?

Who could tell? for nowhere could Harvey Vertner, or trace of him, be found.

"But I will find him," cried the maddened father, "if I track the wide world over," and, roused to busy action, he turned his back on the gaming-table forever, and with the remnant of his wealth settled his sorrow-stricken family as comfortably as he could, and set forth on his search.

But several years passed; then Major Malcolm returned to his home, a white-haired, yet still strong, determined man, and in a tone that still held hope, he said:

"Wife, I have tramped the States over, but nowhere could I find them; but, with the little money we yet have left, we will go to the far West, for there 'tis said he has gone, and there will we build up a new home and new associations, for here we have only bitter memories; what say you?"

"Where you go, I will go," was the loving response of the devoted wife.

"Then to the far West we go, and, mayhap,

in our new home joy may yet be ours," and in a low tone he muttered:

"Yes, when I see Harvey Vertner dead, then will joy be mine."

CHAPTER IV.

"WESTWARD HO!"

EVEN as the ocean's calm, so is the calm of the prairie, and equally as solemn in its solitude, and seemingly as limitless in its expanse, only broken here and there by a "timber island," a haven of refuge for the savage, the weary emigrant, or the daring white hunter, when night casts its dark mantle over the scene.

Such a boundless expanse, stretching away until sky and prairie meet, I would carry the reader to, one balmy afternoon, several years after the scenes enacted in the Sunny South, that brought sorrow and death to a once happy plantation home.

The glory of day is slowly fading before the coming night, and grand in its intense gloom and silence, the prairie rests like the sea in a calm, with no object appearing upon its surface to break or mar its solitude.

But look closer, and down upon the grass-covered earth the eye falls upon a strange sight, for half a hundred human forms are prostrate, and half a hundred steeds lie prone beside their masters.

Has there been a fearful massacre there? No, for there are no red stains for the thirsty earth to drink up; there are no trampled grass and deep hoof-marks to show that there had been a fierce death-struggle; but still as the heart when the spirit has departed, lie horses and riders, and one ascending yonder rise, or prairie roll, a mile distant, and glancing over the broad expanse, would little dream that fifty wild savages lay near, with fifty fleet steeds to bear them down like a red whirlwind upon the unsuspecting traveler.

And why are they thus lying like the dead?

The secret is soon told, for above the distant rise appears a white tilt, which glimmers in the rosy rays of the declining sun; and then comes in view the entire wagon and its team, and another, and another, until, like a fleet of tiny vessels upon the Atlantic's blue waters, are seen the "prairie schooners" of an emigrant train, a squadron launched upon the green bosom of the plain, and winding its way, like a huge white serpent, further and further westward, slowly following the "star of empire" toward the land of the setting sun, the land of the red-man, the haunts of the wild beasts, and the land in whose depths lie untold riches for the hardy pioneers who turn their backs upon the marts of civilization to penetrate the trackless wilderness.

And now the secret is told, of those prostrate half hundred men and beasts, for the keen eye of the advance scout had detected the coming train, and knowing that ere long they would camp, for night was coming on apace, and an inviting stream wound its way along not far distant, the Indians had forced their well-trained steeds to lie down by their sides, that, under the cover of darkness, they might fall upon their unsuspecting foes, and revel in the red debauch of death and plunder.

And over the rise came the train, forty wagons in all, and an ambulance, drawn by two large horses in the van, with horsemen and horsewomen, a score in number, riding along at leisure, and a small herd of cattle, sheep, and extra teams bringing up the rear.

Presently a horseman separated himself from the others and galloped to the front, while he called out to the driver of the ambulance:

"Jack, head for yonder stream, and we will camp there, for that *motte* we see in the distance is fully four miles away."

"Yas, massa," answered the negro driver, and the rider dropped back once more and said to one of the party, who approached him:

"We are fortunate in finding a stream to encamp on, Maverick; but I confess to great anxiety on account of the Scout's not having returned, for he has never before been absent from the train more than six hours at a time, and this morning he left before we broke camp."

"I feel the same anxiety, Major Malcolm, although Powell, or as he is called out here, Fancy Frank, seems like a man who can take care of himself."

The speakers were Major Burt Malcolm, already known to the reader as the Louisiana planter, and Henry Maverick, a stout-hearted, frank-faced pioneer, who was the wagon-master of the train.

The former, whom the reader will remember as the wealthy planter, in his elegant Louisiana home, has greatly changed since he was the hospitable host, for his hair has become frosted, and his face has a look of commingled sorrow and sternness resting upon it.

Fallen by the loss of his property, from his high position, and brooding over the death of his son and sad fate of his eldest daughter, Nina, the major, with the small remnant of his riches, had started for the Far West, there to seek a new home, among associations that would not constantly recall to him the embittered past.

With old Jack, and several faithful servants,

he was to build up his Western home, and the ambulance leading the wagon train was for the comfort of his wife, his daughter Maud, and ward, Violet Vassar, the two latter having grown into beautiful maidenhood, and enjoying with great zest the strange life they were entering upon.

By common consent Major Malcolm had been elected "captain" of the emigrant train, which consisted of a score of families, bound westward ho!

For days they had been slowly marching toward their future homes on the far-away Platte river, and having entered the land of danger, where the red-skin, and the equally dreaded white road-agent, might be encountered at any time, their advance had been conducted with great caution, under the guidance of a young and handsome plainsman, of whose wild life of thrilling adventure strange stories were told.

That morning, upon breaking camp for the day's march, Fancy Frank had gone off on a scout, promising to join them in the afternoon, and find them a good place for encampment; but the shadows of sunset were near at hand, and his coming not caused many a face to wear an anxious look.

"Uncle, there comes the Scout!" suddenly cried Violet Vassar, as, with Maud and a number of others of the younger people, she was varying the long trail by riding upon horseback.

All eyes were at once turned in the direction in which the maiden pointed with her riding-whip, and a mile distant a horseman was seen coming at a rapid gallop, and all felt relieved, and down into the prairie valley the train wended its way.

But a few moments after the horseman appeared over the rise of the plain behind them, and an exclamation of disappointment arose to every lip, for though he rode a white horse, and wore a broad, gray sombrero, which caused him to be taken for Fancy Frank, it was now seen that it was not that personage.

Showing the effects of hard riding the splendid animal dashed up to the train, the rider doffing his sombrero at sight of the ladies, and asking quietly to see the captain.

"I'm wagon-master, but this is the captain," said Henry Maverick, pointing to the major, who asked politely:

"How can I serve you, young sir?"

All eyes were now turned upon the stranger, but he calmly stood the ordeal, though his boyish face flushed slightly at the attention he created.

He was a mere youth, scarcely over eighteen, with a beardless face, black eyes, and curling masses of auburn hair falling upon his shoulders.

He was well mounted upon a wiry animal that it was evident possessed both speed and great endurance, and sat his saddle with an ease that showed he was at home there.

His trappings were rich, and his attire was of buckskin, the leggings tucked into his boot-tops, and a light, broad-rimmed sombrero shaded his face.

A lasso at his saddle-horn, a repeating rifle carried across his knees, and a belt containing a knife and two revolvers, comprised his armament, while a pair of well-filled leathern pouches and a roll of blankets, completed his equipment.

That he was remarkably handsome, and possessed strength and endurance, in spite of his slender build, was evident at a glance, as was also that his face showed pluck and determination to dare what any other man dare do.

In answer to the question of the major, he replied, in strangely soft and pleasant tones:

"I am bound west, sir, and have ridden hard to overtake your train, to ask to join you, for this is a dangerous country for a man to be in alone."

"Certainly, sir, we are always glad to welcome a man of nerve, as you appear to be, and I will invite you to join my mess," answered the major, pleased with the frank, fearless, though boyish face of the stranger.

"Thank you, sir; my name is Ross Elliott; my desire, to roam the western plains, and, should death overtake me, I have no one to mourn my loss."

There was a tinge of bitterness and sorrow commingled in the tone of the stranger, and his words drew him more closely to those who heard them, and Henry Maverick said, bluntly:

"I'll wager, youngster, that if you stay long with us, we'll mourn you when your checks are called in."

"Is that one of your party coming there?" suddenly asked the youth, pointing ahead, where a horseman was visible coming toward the train at an easy gallop.

"The Scout! the Scout!"

The cry arose from a dozen voices, but Maud Malcolm, who had ridden up at the coming of Ross Elliott, said:

"No, Dr. Powell rode his white horse this morning, and yonder steed is black."

"You are right, my child; who can he be? But come, Maverick, here is our camping-ground along the banks of this little stream,"

and the major turned to the wagon-master, who at once ordered the teamsters into position for the night.

CHAPTER V.

THE RED GANTLET.

As the train filed into position, forming a crescent, with each end resting on the bank of the stream, the coming horseman was momentarily forgotten by all, excepting Maud Malcolm, who was narrowly watching him as he drew nearer and nearer, riding at an easy gallop.

"Father, take my glass and see if you can make out from that man's face whether he is white, red or black?" cried Maud, handing her father her tiny field-glass, which he at once turned upon the stranger.

"I cannot see his features, Maud; he is a fine horseman, rides a splendid animal, and is well armed though, be he white, black or red-skin," answered the major, and others of the train now came up and joined the father and daughter, among whom were Ross Elliott and Violet Vassar.

With renewed interest all now gazed upon the coming horseman, who was yet half a mile away, and though three field-glasses were leveled at him, not one could trace his features; but, suddenly, a startled cry broke from the lips of Maud, and it was followed by a shout from Henry Maverick, for, as if by magic, up from the prairie grass sprung half a hundred savage forms and as many steeds, and between the wagon-train and the solitary horseman.

"In Heaven's name what means that?" cried Major Malcolm, in alarm.

"It means death to yonder stranger, major, for these Indians were lying in his path, and seeing that they would be discovered, they are now up and after him," cried Henry Maverick, quickly.

"And they were lying in wait to attack us to-night, doubtless."

"Correct, and would have given us a bad surprise; but, in the name of Satan, don't yonder stranger see the red-skins?" anxiously cried the wagon-master.

"It would seem not, for he has not swerved from his direct path toward us, and does not appear to see them charging upon him," answered the major.

"Come! let us go to his rescue," called out Ross Elliott.

"Hold! youngster, you must take it cool; this train is worth more than one man's life, and, besides, we don't know how many more Indians are hiding there in the grass," cried the wagon-master, and he added, with enthusiasm:

"That man don't scare worth a cent, or—"

"Or what, Mr. Maverick?" asked Maud.

"Or he is deaf and blind both, for see, he has not yet drawn rein, nor turned out of his way, though he is riding at a much greater speed."

And the words of the wagon-master were true, for, seated like a statue in his saddle, his horse fairly flying over the prairie, the stranger came directly on toward the train encampment, though a few hundred yards in his front the Indians had spread out into a long double line, and were moving at a slow gallop to meet him, and evidently wondering at his reckless courage.

"I fear he is in league with them, for he has not yet been fired at by the devils, and seems utterly regardless of their presence," said one of the emigrants.

"It would seem so, Benson; but, our duty is plain; we must form a corral, and prepare for attack," answered the major.

"You are right, major, though I dread no attack," replied a young man, who had joined the train at the last town they had left, and who was clad in half-hunter, half-soldier attire, and possessed a dark attractive face, though it was marred by a look of dissipation and a certain sinister expression that in repose ever rested there, but which vanished when he was conversing.

He answered to the name of Dick Harwood, possessed ample means, said he had been a soldier on the plains, but had resigned his commission of second lieutenant to go East and take possession of a small inheritance, which he had converted into cash, as he desired to become a cattle-owner in the West.

During the time he had been with the train he had devoted himself to Maud, who liked him perhaps the more because her parents warned her against him, though in reality they knew not why, for he was the life of the party, sung well, told a good story, and relieved in various ways the tedium of many a dreary mile.

"I do dread an attack, Mr. Harwood; for those Indians have not been lying in wait for nothing—Ha! see! the stranger now notices them," cried Major Malcolm, and as he spoke the horseman was seen to suddenly raise a short rifle, and still keeping his onward pace, to fire, once! twice! thrice!

A wild yell broke from the emigrant train, for they now saw that the stranger was a friend, not a foe, and, moreover, that every shot sent a red-skin to earth.

With wild yells the red-skins now rushed

upon the brave man, still, however, not firing, as they seemed to wish to take him alive, and could not understand how it was possible for him to escape them, and were consequently extending their line so as to encircle him in their midst.

But, unheeding this dangerous maneuver on their part, and apparently not noticing it, the strange horseman rode on, his splendid animal increasing his speed at every bound, until he seemed to be fairly flying over the prairie.

"Great God! why does he not turn?" cried the major.

"It is too late, sir; the line encircles him," answered Dick Harwood, and with staring eyes all now gazed upon the strange sight, of one reckless man fearlessly endeavoring to break through fifty foes.

Breathlessly men, women and children gazed upon the daring rider, until again they saw him raise his rifle at the group of Indians immediately in his front, and toward which he and the other red-skins were now heading.

Again and again flashed the trusty rifle, until it fairly rattled forth shot after shot, as though half a dozen revolvers were cracking, and yet the stranger swerved not from his path, nor checked his wonderful speed.

A few more bounds and he must be in the midst of his foes, and all in the train held their breath; then they saw him lower his rifle, and in each hand flashed forth a revolver; a wild yell broke from his lips, and he was in the thick of his enemies!

With silence, and staring eyes, the emigrants gazed upon the strange scene, and beheld a struggling mass of men and horses, heard wild cries, death-shouts, the rattle of firearms, the fierce neighing of a steed, and above all the war-cry they knew burst only from the throat of the stranger.

"To his rescue, men! that man must not die before our eyes for want of aid," cried Ross Elliott.

"Hold! he needs not our aid—see!" almost shouted Henry Maverick, the wagon-master, as suddenly out of the *mélée* emerged the splendid steed, his master in the saddle, and turned half around so as to confront his foes, still sending death-shots from his terrible revolvers.

A wild shout of triumph burst from the emigrants, the women and children also joining in, and as it reached his ears the horseman turned; and just in time, for suddenly there arose in his front, and in his pathway, the form of a large horse and rider.

He was an Indian, and a great chief, it was evident, and those who had just met the daring horseman seemed to check their pursuit and await the result.

With long lance in rest, the chief awaited like a knight of old the charge of his fearless adversary, as though confident to accomplish what his hand had failed to do, and this very confidence caused a feeling of dread to fill the hearts of the emigrants.

But there was no time for suspense, for, like a hurricane the horseman charged, the Indian's arrow left its bow, and struck fairly in the breast of his foe; but, unheeding it, the rider still came on, barely giving the chief time to drop his bow and raise his lance.

Fairly the long lance struck the daring man, to be shivered to atoms by the blow, and the next instant the red-skin was torn from his saddle by the strong arms of his enemy, a flash of steel was seen, and, after several bounds of the superb black steed, a lifeless form fell upon the prairie, while around the head of the victor was waved the gory scalp of the Indian; again was heard that ringing cry, which was answered again and again by the emigrants, who were wild with excitement at the desperate red gantlet run by the stranger, still apparently unharmed by the clouds of arrows sent after him by the maddened savages, who had nearly a score of their band to mourn over.

CHAPTER VI.

CAPTAIN CRIMSON.

"WELL, if ever man bore a charmed life, that one does," said Major Malcolm, as the strange horseman came on out of danger, leaving the discomfited Indians gazing after him as though they believed him possessed of supernatural powers.

In this remark of the major's all concurred, and eagerly stood around in groups, awaiting the coming of the superb animal and his daring rider.

A moment more and he dashed into their midst, and drew rein, while every eye was closely scanning horse and horseman, the beauty and splendid points of the black steed winning admiration for him from all lovers of horseflesh.

But the rider? He was certainly one to win respect and admiration, for he sat his saddle with an ease that showed he was at home there, and his form was such as to command regard in any assemblage of men.

Tall, slender, and with broad shoulders, his build was indicative of great endurance and strength above the average, and yet was elegantly molded, and his every movement was

graceful, though quick, and apparently nervous. His attire was also striking, for it consisted of a pair of black velvet pants, stuck in top-boots, the heels of which were armed with gold spurs; his jacket was of crimson plush, a striking target to aim at, and was elaborately trimmed with gold buttons and gilt braid, while a shirt of soft white silk was visible underneath.

Around his waist was worn a crimson silk sash, half-hiding a belt that held a pair of gold-mounted, ivory-handled revolvers, and a bowie-knife, the companions to which rested in holsters on one side of the broad horn of his Mexican saddle, while a lasso, neatly coiled, hung upon the other side, and his deadly repeating-rifle was carried across his knees, showing that he was armed to the teeth.

But still more remarkable was the fact that an iron mask concealed his face from view; but, that he was a white man one of his hands, from which the gauntlet glove had been removed, revealed.

The only features visible beneath this iron covering, which was shaped to fit the face, were a pair of brilliant black eyes, but the metal curtain that fell upon his shoulders, encircling his neck, concealed all else, excepting the masses of waving dark hair that hung far down his back, almost to his waist.

Upon his head he wore a crimson sombrero, and it was evident that an iron skull-cap inside of it had protected him from the arrows of his foes, for there were several cuts in it, made by missiles meant to take his life, while the rent in his shirt-front where the lance of the chief had struck, proved that it had met something harder than human flesh and bone to resist it.

His jet-black stallion, long in body, gaunt as a grayhound and clean in limb, wore a housing of steel network painted black, and hardly visible at a short distance, while the large Mexican saddle had also protected him from lance and arrow wounds, though he was bleeding from several insignificant cuts upon his legs and neck.

Back of the silver-mounted saddle was a roll of oil-cloth, containing a Mexican *serape* and army cloak, and upon each side were leather pockets, one for provisions, the other for ammunition and a change of clothing. In fact, this Man of the Iron Face, and gorgeously-appearing stranger, was equipped most thoroughly for a trip across the plains, or a deadly combat with red-skins.

What he was capable of, the emigrants well knew, for they had just seen him tried, and with undisguised admiration they gazed upon him as he drew up his panting horse, and with his ungloved hand touched a spring in the mask, that caused the lower part to slide up, and revealed a firm chin, and decided, fearless mouth, shaded with a brown mustache.

All were in hopes that he would remove his mask wholly, but he disappointed them, and thereby set busy brains to work, wondering why he concealed his face from the gaze of his fellow-man.

"It cannot be from the fear of recognition from some crime committed, for so brave a man could not be a criminal," thought Violet Vassar.

"Some hideous scar received in battle doubtless causes him to wear a mask," was in Maud Malcolm's mind, and various other mental comments were made regarding the stranger, who, apparently unheeding the fact that every eye was upon him, and some of them very pretty ones too, said, in a calm, deep tone:

"Is this the emigrant train of Major Malcolm?"

"It is, sir, and I am Burt Malcolm," answered the major.

"Word was brought to the fort, sir, that your train was coming West, and I volunteered to come and warn you that double danger lay on your trail, for not only is that accursed bandit, the Mad Colonel, and his Prairie Tigers lying in wait for you, but Black Kettle and his Dog Soldier Sioux are on the war-path."

"And yet you, alone, have safely passed through their lines," said Maud Malcolm, with interest.

"Ah, lady, one man who understands prairie craft can go where a hundred could not. But, Major Malcolm, I give you the knowledge of the dangers before you, and you know best what to do, as to going on to your destination or retracing your way."

"What would you advise, sir?"

"First ask your guide, who I learned at the fort is the famous Medicine Chief, White Beaver, as the Indians call him, and whose good looks and fanciful attire have won him the name among the hunters of Fancy Frank."

"Doctor Powell, or Fancy Frank, is our guide, and has been since we left Fort Hays, where he volunteered to act in that capacity, when knowing I needed a man I could thoroughly rely on."

"I have never met White Beaver, sir, but his reputation as a man who knows the plains, and

* A real character; Dr. D. F. Powell, an ex-surgeon of the army, and a man whose life has been full of thrilling adventures. He now lives in Minnesota, and is known as White Beaver, the Medicine Chief.

can match Indian cunning with cunning, is well known; but I never knew of him, before this, acting as guide, as he seemed to roam the prairies merely from love of danger; is he with you now?"

"He left us this morning, and as he is behind his appointed time to return, I fear danger has befallen him."

"Hail rode he a white horse?" quickly asked the Man of the Iron Face.

"Yes."

"Then he is a prisoner—"

"What?"

"True, for, as I cut through yonder line of red-skins, I saw a white man bound upon the ground, and beside him a white horse also tied down; the man hailed me as I passed, but an Indian guard threw himself upon him, and I was a little too busy just then to see more; but come, sir, as Fancy Frank is not here, I will act as your guide, and advise that you at once hitch up and start for yonder motte, for there is a good spring there, thick timber, and you can stand a siege should the Indians press you. Come, sir, you must force your teams, for we have no time to lose."

The advice of the stranger was at once taken, and in ten minutes more the train was moving along at a rapid pace toward the motte, while Captain Crimson, as some of the teamsters said he was called on the plains, scouted around, accompanied by Ross Elliott, Dick Harwood and several other young men of the company.

The band of Indians slowly retired before them, keeping out of range, but showing no desire to depart, a circumstance that proved to Captain Crimson that a larger party were near by to support them.

An hour's march through the gathering gloom, and the Indians seemed to comprehend that the motte was the place of destination, and they at once set out to defeat the object of the emigrants by first taking possession of it, for they started at a full run for the place, just as the train suddenly changed its course, for it had not been heading for the timber, for the purpose of throwing the red-skins off the scent.

"Come! we must ride for life, for the Indians are making for the motte, and if they reach it first, we will be at their mercy."

The warning cry came in the ringing tones of the stranger, and at a rapid run the party of horsemen, a dozen in number, set off for the timber, and between them and their foes it became indeed a race of life and death.

CHAPTER VII.

FOR LIFE OR DEATH.

THE "timber island," or motte, toward which the Indian band, and the small party on horseback from the train, were urging their horses at full speed, was about three acres in size, and was thickly wooded, though it had long been a camping-place for roving red-skins, scouting troopers and emigrants.

A spring of clear water, generous in its flow, bubbled up in its center, and a number of trees had been felled and placed in position as a barricade, by parties who had stood a siege there in days gone by, so that no better place for resistance could be found, and the Indians well knew that if they could reach the motte they would force the whites to encamp on the open prairie, while they dispatched messengers for Black Kettle and his warriors, of which band of marauders they were a part.

To deceive the Indians as to their intention, Captain Crimson had told Major Malcolm to head obliquely away from the motte, and by so doing their foes retreated before them, until a point was reached where the two parties were about equal distance from the haven of refuge.

But the moment the train turned directly for the timber, the red-skins saw how cleverly they had been deceived, and at full speed started for the shelter; but at the same time Captain Crimson and his band spurred for the same destination, and thus it became a race for life or death between them.

Unheeding the fact that the redskins outnumbered him four to one, Captain Crimson urged his half-score followers to drive the rowels deep and follow him, and in silence the two bands were flying toward the common center, and at the start a little over two-thirds of a mile apart, while the train came on as rapidly as possible on the trail of their friends.

As they drew nearer the motte the whites and the Indians gradually came closer and closer to each other, and Captain Crimson discovered with joy that the emigrants were so well mounted that they were slowly drawing ahead of the red skins, and, if their horses could keep up the killing pace at which they were going, they would reach the timber just in time to dismount and open fire upon their foes, who he knew would dash in upon them to break their line if possible.

His own splendid horse seemed only in a fast gallop, and was evidently capable of far greater speed; but his master did not urge him, until he saw that his companions' steeds were failing slowly.

Then he said tersely:

"Hold on as you are, gentlemen, and I will dash ahead and endeavor to check the speed of

the red-skins; spare not your spurs, and form your line of defense as soon as you reach the timber."

Before reply was made the daring man wheeled suddenly to the right, and darted away like an arrow directly for the flying band of Indians.

Ere the splendid steed he rode had gone half a dozen bounds the red-skins saw his daring act, and momentarily they drew rein, while a wild yell went up from them, for they but too well remembered the prowess of their iron-faced foe.

But, realizing the importance of reaching the timber before their enemies, they again pressed on, half a dozen only swerving to the left to meet their dangerous antagonist.

But had the whole band charged upon him, it is doubtful whether Captain Crimson would have given ground, for, with one of his wild yells of defiance, he raised his trusty repeating rifle, and those of the train, nearly a mile away, saw the rapid flashes of the weapon, and heard the yells of hatred that told but too well that the red-skins were suffering.

With cries of terror those that remained of the party that had gone to meet the white horseman turned in pursuit of their comrades; but Captain Crimson was hot on their trail, and every bound of his horse drew him nearer and nearer, until turning in their saddles, through the gloom they beheld upon their path the man who had given them such cause for dread.

And rapidly as he gained upon them, he made his rifle rattle, and, as he sped along like the wind, a fallen horse, or dead human form, told him that his aim was true.

But, determined, now, at all hazards, to reach the timber, the red-skins seemed content to suffer, rather than fail in their intention, and seeing that the failing of the emigrants' horses placed them now neck and neck in the mad race, they urged their own hardy ponies on with lash and yells, while their hearts grew black with hatred of the fearless foe they dare not turn and fight, for fear of losing the advantage they were making such efforts to gain, and were slowly succeeding in doing.

As if discovering that the red-skins would certainly reach the timber in advance of his comrades, Captain Crimson suddenly determined upon another course of action, and dashed away abruptly to the right oblique, and at a speed that caused the savages to believe he rode a flying horse.

With bounds that caused him to fairly fly over the prairie, the black stallion gained upon the ponies of the Indians, and gradually began to make a circuit around them, his grim master keeping up the while a rapid fire upon his foes.

Yard by yard he gained, until he was running abreast of the Indians, and about three hundred yards distant, while almost opposite on the other side, and equally as far away, was the small band of emigrant horsemen, burying their spurs deep into the sides of their tired steeds.

Thus the scout, the Indians, and the half-score of white riders pressed toward the haven of refuge, the timber, distant about a mile, while far in the rear came the train, hurrying on, anxious indeed regarding the small party that had left them, and praying earnestly that success might crown their daring efforts, and well knowing the desperate struggle they were making against fearful odds.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT BAY AND A NEW FOE.

WHEN the remarkable man with the face of iron, gained a position abreast of the flying band of red-skins, they swerved a little to the left, as if in dread of his fearful rifle, and expected to see him boldly charge them as he did before, and the chief hastily called out for a dozen of his warriors to be ready to meet him in that event, while he and the remainder continued to press on for the timber.

But the calculations of the Indians were wrong, as Captain Crimson urged his stallion on at a greater speed, and rapidly he began to drop the ponies of the red skins behind, and, with yells of rage, they realized that their deadly foe held the power to reach the timber before them, and once in its shelter they dreaded his terrible aim.

As the black carried his master swiftly away from them, the chief in command was in a quandary what to do; but, as the timber seemed their only salvation to keep the train out on the open prairie, they determined to reach it at all hazards, should half their number fall, for the coming of their chief, Black Kettle and his force, would wreak upon the whites a fearful revenge.

Yet, should the whites gain the timber, they well knew half a thousand warriors would find it difficult to dislodge them.

Having made up his mind to reach the motte, Captain Crimson bent his energies to that duty, and his noble black went over the prairie at a speed that won admiration from the Indians, in spite of their hatred for his master, and made them determined to capture him, and, for this reason, not a shot was fired upon the daring man, who was certainly within easy range.

Thus several moments of suspense passed, and

the straining eyes of the red-skins beheld the black steed disappear within the shadow of the timber; almost immediately followed a flash; then another, and another, from its dark depths.

There was but one course now to pursue, and that was for them to rush boldly into the thicket, and have it out in a hand-to-hand struggle before the train could come up, and they felt that in such an unequal contest they must be successful.

But, hardly had the chief given his orders, when that deadly repeating rifle opened with such fearful rapidity and telling result, that ponies and riders went down in the front, and the band temporarily wavered and drew rein.

But, one man must not keep them from the goal they sought, and with wild yells they again urged their horses onward; but the temporary delay had given the almost forgotten emigrants an advantage, and into the shelter dashed Dick Harwood and his followers, their rifles also dealing death upon their red foes.

"Let one man take the horses; the balance come here! Now give it to them!"

The order was in the stern tones of Captain Crimson, and throwing themselves from their saddles, the emigrants hastily found shelter behind trees, and forming a line, opened a scattering fire upon the Indians, now not sixty yards away, and coming on at full speed, and with demoniacal yells that would strike terror to almost any heart, no matter how brave.

But the fire that met them, in spite of the reckless courage of some of their warriors, brought them to a stand-still; then their ranks wavered beneath the hot shower of lead, and they wheeled and sought refuge out of range of the rifles of their foes, for the half-score whites at bay were more than a match for the red-skins, though they were yet nearly two score in number.

Disappointed in reaching the timber, enraged at the loss of their comrades, and thirsting for revenge, the red-skins turned and rode from the motte in the direction of the coming train.

"They are going to attack the train," cried Dick Harwood.

"Yes, come, let us to the rescue," answered Ross Elliott.

"Hold! that is but a feint to draw us from the timber, for they know their horses are the freshest, and they can ride us down; there is a white man to meet nearly every Indian, in yonder train, so they'll not attack them openly; but you remain here, and I will go out and follow them."

Captain Crimson gave a call, and his intelligent stallion came trotting to his side with a low neigh.

Mounting, the strange man rode away in pursuit of the Indians, who were circling around the coming train, firing their arrows at long range, and keeping on the off side of their ponies to avoid the bullets of the emigrants.

Suddenly, as the Scout approached, the red-skins drew rein, held an instant's consultation, and then sped away like the wind.

One glance over the prairie and the Man of the Iron Face gave a cry that urged his horse into a rapid run, and in a few moments he dashed up to the head of the train, crying out in ringing tones:

"For your lives, drive! The Mad Colonel and his band are coming!"

He pointed across the prairie as he spoke, and the rising moon revealed a number of horsemen to the ordinary gaze, but a closer glance proved that they were not Indians, and instantly every teamster urged on his tired animals, and all was eagerness and dread, for the name of the Mad Colonel was enough to bring terror to each heart, for far and wide his evil deeds were known, and his band of renegades were the scourge of the plains.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TIMBER CORRAL.

WITH creaking wheels, swaying tilts, and at a speed they had never been urged to before, the wagons went over the prairie, while the shouting teamsters, the cracking whips, the bleating of the sheep and lowing of the frightened cattle added to crying children, cackling and, chickens, made up a Babel of sounds and a scene of intense excitement and confusion.

That they could be both seen and were distinctly heard by the renegades was evident to all, and hasty glances over the plain showed that the Mad Colonel was preparing to take advantage of the situation, by at once throwing himself into the motte, and thereby force the emigrants to encamp on the open prairie, for the size of the train proved to him that there were enough defenders to give him a hard-fought battle, should he attack them openly.

With this intention, he moved rapidly toward the timber, and though further off than the train, it was evident that he could reach the shelter before the emigrants; but suddenly out of the shadows of the motte flashed a bright blaze, and then another, and another, which brought the renegades to a halt, for as the train still held on, it was evident that the emigrants had nothing to fear.

With bitter curses at their ill-luck, the Prairie Tigers watched the long train until it disap-

peared in the timber, and then beheld, by the firelights, the rapid movements made for a defense of the haven the emigrants had so fortunately reached.

Once in the timber, Captain Crimson hastily arranged the train for resistance, the wagons being formed in a circle, taking in an acre, in which the cattle were corraled, and the women and children safely taken to a small interior fort, around which their tents were pitched, while the men and boys were divided into four parties and assigned to the barricades of logs at each side of the motte.

With ax and spade these barricades were strengthened, and then Captain Crimson went around with Major Malcolm, and Dick Harwood and Ross Elliott, the latter two being appointed aides, while Henry Maverick was made second in command.

"And you will leave us?" asked the major, turning to the masked scout after they had visited all the defenses and the camp, and pronounced all in readiness to meet the Mad Colonel, and the Indians, too, should they also attack.

"Yes, I desire to discover the fate of your guide, Fancy Frank, and rescue him if possible," answered Captain Crimson.

"I would be glad to see the guide out of their fiendish hands, but fear you run a great risk for a man who is a stranger to you."

"He is not a stranger to me, Major Malcolm, for I owe to him my life," responded the Man of the Iron Face, impressively.

"Indeed! I understood you to say that you had never met him."

"I have met him, though at the time I was unconscious, and I owe him my life, and it shall be freely risked in his aid."

"I am glad to know he has so fair a chance of escape, for I believe you will be successful, and sincerely do I hope so, for Fancy Frank I became deeply attached to, as in fact we all did."

"He is one of Nature's noblemen, Major Malcolm, and a man who does not know what fear is."

"Reared in luxury, he entered the army from love of adventure. A sad experience has been his indeed, and he has turned his back upon civilization to roam these prairies, brooding over misfortunes he has known, but carrying his sorrows with a smiling lip, though the bitterest hatred and most revengeful feelings are ever in his heart."

"And you too, sir, seem to have turned your back upon society and sought a home here among savages," said Major Malcolm, gazing earnestly upon the masked face before him.

"True, sir, as you have done, but from far different motives, as I am prompted by the same feeling that governs the man known as White Beaver—Ah! who have we here?"

The man turned quickly, and like a flash his revolver was in his hand, as suddenly two dark forms arose from the thicket, not ten paces from where he stood, with Major Malcolm by his side.

Drawing a weapon, too, the major also turned toward the two strangers, who stood silently regarding them, and also ready for the death-struggle, should it come to that, for their rifles were pointed directly at the hearts of Captain Crimson and Major Malcolm.

CHAPTER X.

"I CALCULATE this hain't goin' ter be a shootin' fandango,"

The remark came from the lips of one of the two men who had suddenly appeared before Captain Crimson and the major.

"That depends upon who and what you are," was the quiet response of the Man of the Iron Face.

"Who and what we is, pard? Waal, as we is ther visitors, I guesses as how we'd better explain. We is tenderfeet from ther pararer, Injun-hunters, trappers, or anything as suits our fancy that is honest like, an' we is on ther shoot clean through."

"This pard o' mine are known as Rattling Rifle, seel' as how he's got a new-fangled shootin'-iron thet kin jist throw out sixteen bullets without reloadin', but his raal name when he were christin'd were Pete Parley, and he's white clean through, an' ther man as says he hain't has ter fight me."

"I have heard of Rattling Rifle, and as he is said to have an inseparable partner, I guess you are Skeleton Sam," said Captain Crimson.

"I are that twin, pard; I are Sam Ledbetter from ole Vermont, but Skeleton Sam out here on ther pararer, and me an' Pete here is twins, for whar you find one of us, t'other is within range; now who mou't you be, pard?"

"Come, and you shall know; and allow me to say that you are welcome, for we need all such good men as you are, since just now we are in trouble," and the Man of the Iron Face led the way toward a fire of logs, which burned brightly up from within a screen of brush, while Skeleton Sam said, as they went along:

"We was out on ther pararer an' kind o' calkulated you wasn't happy, when we seen ther band o' ther mad colonel and ther Injuns, an'

as yer was white, clean through, we jist sneaked in ter lend yer a hand, but yer'd better have yer men keep ther eyes wider open, for we came in atween 'em, jist ter see ef they were awake."

"Report says that you and your pard can go where a snake can, friend Sam; but here we are, and we'll decide upon some plan to outwit this Mad Colonel and his Indian allies. This gentleman is Major Malcolm, the captain of the emigrant train, and I—"

"You needn't ter interdoose yerself, fer I knows yer by thet iron face; you is chained lightnin' turned loose on ther pararer, and the boys says as how yer'd fight ther devil and his first cousin, jist for fun. You knows him, pard?" and Skeleton Sam turned to his partner, who had not before this spoken, but who now answered:

"Yas, we has all heerd o' Captain Crimson, ther Man with ther Iron Face, an' he are greased thunder, as yer say, Sam, or ther boys is wretched liars; I is glad ter meet yer, Iron Face, so put it thar," and Rattling Rifle held forth his hand, which was warmly grasped, while Skeleton Sam chipped in with:

"An' gi'n me ther grasp o' honest flesh, Iron Face, for I likes a squar' man, as you is said ter be, an' my opinion o' a man's clothin' has hed another set-back, for I thought it tuck buckskin ter make ther man out heur, until Fancy Frank, ther medicine-chief, changed my tune, for though he rigs out as fine as a belle at a ball, I has seen him do more hard fightin' in a minute than a regiment kin do in a day, and ther Lord knows you is tagged out as fine as ther queen's fiddler."

That the two "pards" were characters, there was no doubt, but as daring scouts, successful Indian-fighters, and trailers far above the average, were known from Omaha to Denver, and Iron Face, as he was often called, considered it a lucky circumstance that they had happened upon the scene as they did.

Skeleton Sam was an elongated specimen of the *genus homo*, several inches over six feet in height, and made up of skin and bone, but as wiry as a snake, and as strong as a giant.

His face was cadaverous, but so stamped with frank honesty and fearlessness that it was not homely, while his eyes were as keen as an eagle's.

Dressed in buckskin, from moccasins to head-gear, and armed with a heavy old-fashioned double-barreled gun, one barrel rifled, the other used for buckshot at close quarters, and with three pistols and a knife in his belt, he was an odd-looking genius indeed, while his "twin pard," as he called Rattling Rifle, was his exact opposite, being short, stout, and wearing a blanket suit and coon-skin cap, while his Winchester repeating-rifle and silver-mounted revolvers proved that he thought more of his weapons than he did of his personal appearance and comfort.

A round, pleasant face, and with a merry twinkle in his blue eyes, he yet had very little to say, excepting to Sam, who did most of the talking at all times.

With undisguised admiration the two men gazed upon the Man of the Iron Face, for the past year strange stories had been told of the solitary wanderer with the masked face, who seemed only intent upon wreaking vengeance upon the Prairie Tigers and the Indian band of the Dog Soldier Sioux chief, Black Kettle, who was also a marauder.

Whether he had suffered some deep wrong from the Tigers and Dog Soldiers none knew, but it was surmised that he had, and certain it was that he had caused them to dread him as death itself, for they seemed never safe, in camp, or on the march, from his unerring rifle, and their every effort to overtake his fleet steed had been as unavailing as had their shots to wound him, so that they believed he bore a charmed life.

"You is glad ter see us, pard; so is we to see you, for we has heerd o' you, an' we'll chip in an' help yer in this fight," Skeleton Sam declared.

"I thank you, my friends; but Major Malcolm is the one you are to aid, for he has command of the train, and you can render him great service, for his guide, Fancy Frank, the Medicine Chief, is a prisoner to the Indians."

"What! hes that red varmint, Black Kettle, got Fancy Frank?" cried Skeleton Sam, in anger.

"He has."

"Oh, Lordy! this are too bad, for he'll skulp him an' then roast him! Ah, my twin pard, what will we do, for 'tain't in our natur' to see Fancy Frank cleaned out."

"No, Sam, ther White Beaver mustn't hev his checks called in ef we kin save him," answered Rattling Rifle.

"Ef we kin save him! Oh! we is able, an' don't you forget it, pard, for I is a whole team an' a boss ter let, an' will chaw 'em up! Oh! I'm a pararer fire lookin' fer dry grass, so let's strike ther trail an' reskoo White Beaver."

"Hold on, my friends, for I have already determined to do that, as I owe Fancy Frank a debt of gratitude I wish to repay. You remain here to aid the major with your good advice,

and, major, I would advise that you be governed by what Sam and Pete say, for they know just what to do."

"I will, Mr.—Mr.— I declare I do not know your name, sir," said the major, hesitatingly.

"Men call me on the plains, sir, Captain Crimson. Perhaps that name will do as well as any other," was the quiet response.

"It is a suitable one, at all events, sir. Well, Captain Crimson, I will follow your advice, for you have shown yourself capable of giving the best; I have about eighty men and boys in the train, able to bear arms, and with the aid of these two gentlemen here—"

"Hold on, pard, don't yer sling thet talk at us, for we is squar' clean through, an' no gent'men; no, we is plain Sam and Pete, you bet, an' you'll find us on hand when yer needs us, but we isn't gent'men now, I reckon," put in Skeleton Sam.

"Well, I'll trust you fully, my friends, be you what you may, but, are you off, Captain Crimson?"

"Yes, major; Whirlwind, as I call my horse, has had a rest, and I will go on the hunt for your guide, and hope to rejoin you soon with him. Good-evening," and Iron Face strode away into the interior of the motte, where his splendid horse was quietly feeding.

Saddling him, and then looking to his arms, Iron Face was about to mount, when he started suddenly, at a light touch upon his arm.

"Hal! it is you? Miss Malcolm, I believe," he said, quickly, withdrawing the hand from the revolver butt it had involuntarily fallen upon.

"Yes, Captain Crimson, for so others call you, it seems," she answered.

"If you like not the name, lady, call me Iron Face," he said, in a tone the maiden could not understand.

"That is as impenetrable as the other, sir; but I will not seek to penetrate your secret or your name, for, be you who and what you may, you deserve all our gratitude for the service you have rendered us to-day," she said, warmly.

"And how can I serve you now, Miss Malcolm?" he asked, calmly.

"By telling me the truth: is the scout, Fancy Frank, dead?"

"No; at least I think not, for the Indians would not put him to death until they return to their village."

"Is there no hope for his rescue?"

"It is upon that duty I am now going, Miss Malcolm."

"God bless you, sir, for those words! Pardon me if I show a deeper interest in the scout than perhaps I should, but he has ever been kind to me, and I would not know that he died at the hands of cruel savages, without one effort of his friends to save him."

"I will do all in my power, Miss Malcolm, for his sake, and for yours, and hope soon to bring you good news."

"But you run fearful risks."

"My life is hourly in danger, Miss Malcolm, but I believe in Fate, and feel I am not doomed to die until I accomplish that which I have sworn to do."

The last few words were spoken in a low, earnest tone, and Maud Malcolm felt that the man before her was set upon the keeping of some vow of vengeance, from which death alone could swerve him.

"One word more, Captain Crimson: is there danger of our being massacred here, for, if I hear aright, the Indian band of Black Kettle will league against us with that fearful chief men call the Mad Colonel?"

"Your father is an able commander, Miss Malcolm, and he has brave men under him, and an almost impregnable position, so that the Mad Colonel and Black Kettle combined, dare not attempt to charge upon him; but every eye must be kept open that they do not accomplish by strategy and cunning, what they cannot by arms. See, yonder in the distance, where you went into camp at sunset, the Mad Colonel is now encamped—"

"And the Indians?"

"Are lying upon the prairie, a few hundred yards distant, and encircling this motte, and keeping watch."

"And yet you intend to ride forth?"

"Oh, I shall break through their lines without trouble, and some miles distant one awaits me whom I shall send at once to the fort for troopers to come to your aid; but, now, I must be off. Farewell."

"May success attend you, sir," and Maud held forth her hand, which Iron Face warmly grasped, and, throwing himself lightly into the saddle, he rode from the shadow of the timber out upon the open prairie.

The maiden stood watching the dark forms of horse and rider, until they disappeared from sight; but some impulse to remain still held her to the spot, and, with the emigrant guards, she still stood gazing out into the impenetrable gloom, awaiting, she knew not what.

Then, suddenly, an exclamation burst from half a dozen lips, and far out on the plain came bright flashes in rapid succession, and to the listening ears was wafted the crack of fire-arms.

The next moment Skeleton Sam and Rattling-

Rifle dashed up to the spot, followed by Major Malcolm and others, and the former cried:

"That's Crimson, an' no mistake; he's struck a rich lead o' red blood, an' he's a followin' it. Hooray! he's bizzness clean through, an' he'll chaw 'em up, scalps an' all."

Then, turning to Maud, he continued:

"If I were a likely gal, such as you is, miss, I'd a heap ruther git soft on a chap like thet Cap'en Crimson, even ef his face is masked, then git gone on a feller as you c'u'd see clean through at one squint."

Maud blushed, but it was too dark for it to be seen, and her face instantly paled, as Rattling Rifle remarked:

"It's over, pard."

"What is over, sir?" she asked, anxiously.

"The rackit, ther bullit fandango."

"I do not understand, sir."

"He's got through, or he's been wiped out."

"Killed?"

"One or t'other, miss, but I rather guesses he's all right."

Maud strained her eyes out upon the prairie; but all was darkness there, and all was silence.

Was the strange Man of the Iron Face dead?

That question none there could answer, and with a moan Maud Malcolm turned away, for, if Captain Crimson was dead, she felt that the fate of Fancy Frank was also sealed.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MAD COLONEL AND HIS TIGERS.

NOT very far distant from the spot on the creek, where the emigrant train had just gone into camp, the band of road-agents, known as Prairie Tigers, had encamped for the night, and the small trees growing on the banks of the stream had been hastily felled and made use of as firewood, with which to cook the evening meal, for the marauders had ridden far that day, and were both tired and hungry.

Out upon the prairie their steeds were tethered to feed, while the riders, some thirty in number, were gathered around the fires, watching the cooking of their buffalo and antelope steaks, or drinking vile whisky, and conversing in the low, but earnest tones of men accustomed to lead lives of danger, and knew not what moment they might be called upon to mingle in the death-struggle.

Apart from the main portion of the band was their chief, reclining upon a *serape* thrown in front of a blazing fire, and resting his elbow upon the horn of his silver-bespangled saddle.

He was dressed in the full uniform of a cavalry colonel in the United States army, even to the epaulettes; though he wore a Mexican sombrero, encircled by a gold cord, instead of the regulation slouch hat.

His form, as he gracefully reclined at length, was certainly elegant in outline, and his feet, incased in handsome cavalry boots, and gauntlet-covered hands were small and shapely.

As the firelight shone full in his face each clearly cut feature was plainly visible, and no one who gazed upon his almost womanly beauty, with his small mouth, pearly teeth, large, lustrous eyes, and long, curling hair, would have believed that he was the terror of the plains, the chief of the Prairie Tigers, whose daring and devilish deeds had won for him the name of the Mad Colonel, for 'twas said he was an ex-army officer, who preferred, from his fierce nature, to command a band of outlaws, rather than a regiment of honest troopers.

Puffing idly at a cigar, he seemed wholly indifferent to anything except his comfort; but started, as a horse dashed suddenly up to within a few paces of where he lay, and the rider sprang to the ground.

"Well, my prairie wildflower, you have the scalp of the one you pursued, of course?" he said, inquiringly, gazing at the new-comer, who was a woman—yes, a woman of marvelous beauty of both face and form.

She was attired in a deep black riding-habit, wore a sombrero of the same somber hue, and also gauntlets, while the steed, who stood patiently at her side, had a jetty hide unmarred by a spot of white, and was accoutered with saddle and bridle of the same funereal appearance.

But the woman?

She was slightly above the medium height, with a form that was exquisitely molded, and a face that was strangely fascinating for its dimpled beauty, and the look of intense sadness that dwelt far back in the dreamy eyes, and rested upon the ruby lips, which ever and anon quivered slightly, as though moved by some internal emotion ever bursting forth from the cells of memory's casket.

"No, he escaped me," quietly responded the woman, who could scarcely be over twenty-two, and, having thrown back the cloak that drooped from her shoulders, the act discovered that a small rifle hung at her back, and the belt that encircled her slender waist held a pair of revolvers and a knife.

"Escaped you, my lovely Black Specter? How was that possible, and you mounted on Ebony?" answered the Mad Colonel, in a tone not unpleasant or unkind.

"I know not, excepting that Ebony found his match in the horse ridden by the Indian; I

chased him for miles and could not gain an inch, so returned to join you at the timber, but discovered that others were encamped there, and meeting Black Kettle's warriors they told me I would find you here."

"Yes, an emigrant train, and a very rich one, I have heard, is encamped in the timber; but I shall soon know all about them, if no harm has befallen my spy— Ha! speak of the devil, and his imps will appear! Welcome, my gallant lieutenant, and tell us the news," and the road-agent chief held forth his hand to a person who just then approached.

"Good-evening, colonel! I am happy to greet you again, fair lady," replied the new-comer, turning his horse loose to feed near by, and joining the chief and the woman, who had also thrown herself languidly down upon the *serape*, and who nodded coolly to the salutation.

"I got your word that the train was a rich one but strong, Dick; now tell me all about it," said the colonel, and, as the new-comer turned his face to the fire-light, the bold, dissipated features of Dick Harwood were revealed.

"Well, colonel, I joined the layout on the Republican, and have been with them since, they believing me to be a man intending to become a ranchero."

"It's a pleasant party, all of them having more or less money, and they are strong enough to make a fight that will stand us off, unless—"

"Unless what, Dick?" asked the chief, as the young man paused.

"Unless we join forces with Black Kettle and his band."

"I have thought of that; but that old red sinner and his warriors will want more plunder than I am willing to give."

"There's a little petticoat plunder in the train he shall not have, unless he puts me underground, for I've lost my heart, colonel."

"What! in love, Dick?"

"I am dead gone, and with a girl who, no matter what she may be hereafter, is certainly an angel in petticoats here on earth; for she's beautiful and good, far too good for such as I am."

"And she loves you?"

There was a sneer in the woman's tone as she asked the question, and the handsome young villain colored, but answered recklessly:

"I do not know; I thought so, some time back, but then I had a dangerous rival in that devilish Medicine Chief, who has turned guide; I mean White Beaver, colonel."

"Ha! Fancy Frank?"

"Yes, sir; it seems he was in Leavenworth and met the party there, and saved the old major's life from a crowd of roughs who attacked him, and he volunteered to act as guide, knowing they wanted one for the train."

"That man I shall one day kill, for I hate him," said the colonel, with vindictive hatred.

"He may be dead now, for the Indians, some of old Kettle's band, captured him this morning; but we have another foe as dangerous as White Beaver."

"Who, for instance?"

"The Man of the Iron Face."

"Ha! Captain Crimson, they call him; he too shall die, for I have heard he seeks my life, and he certainly has killed half a dozen of my men."

"He bears a charmed life, colonel; as I can swear to; just before I left the train, pretending I was coming out on a short scout, he rode away, and cut through Kettle's line of Indians."

"Which way did he go?"

"I do not know, but his trail can be taken at daylight and followed, for we have plenty of time to take the train in, as our best plan is to starve them out."

"No, the troopers would be down upon us within the week; we must take them by force, and can only do so with Black Kettle's aid."

"But my sweet little Maud Malcolm must not be harmed, colonel."

"What name did you say, sir?" and with a livid face the woman sprang to her feet and confronted the outlaw lieutenant of the Prairie Tigers, for such he really was.

"I said Maud Malcolm, madam," he answered, coldly; but the chief was now upon his feet, and he asked in allow tone, and evidently deeply moved:

"The girl's father is with the train?"

"Yes, colonel; he is its captain," replied Dick Harwood, wondering at the emotion of his chief and the woman.

"His name, for you should know, sir?"

"Major Burt Malcolm."

"Oh, God have mercy!"

The cry came from the woman's lips, and she covered her pale face with her gloved hands, as though to shut out some horrible phantoms that flitted before her vision.

"Major Malcolm in yonder train? Say, Harwood, what others of his family has he with him?" asked the chief, in a low tone.

"His wife, a sad-faced woman; his daughter Maud, of whom I spoke, and a niece, his ward, a pretty girl by the name of Violet Vassar."

"Oh, God have mercy!"

Again the cry seemed wrung from the woman's lips, and the young lieutenant said, with a slight sneer in his tones:

"The names seem to call up unpleasant memories to the Black Specter."

"Silence, sir! You will not comment upon the grief, or acts of my wife, unless you wish to quarrel with me," broke sternly from the lips of the Mad Colonel.

"No, colonel, I will not quarrel with you; but have you orders for me?" calmly answered the lieutenant, though his dark eyes flashed fire.

"Yes; remain with the band, and see that they are ready to move at once."

Dick Harwood bowed and strode away toward the camp-fires of the men, followed by his well-trained horse.

As his form disappeared from sight, the chief turned to the woman he had called his wife, and said in a low tone:

"Well, my prairie Wildbird, you heard the words of Harwood?"

"Yes, and I shall warn the train of the danger they have to encounter."

"That every man, woman and child knows; but you shall do no such thing."

"What, do you dare me?" and the woman turned upon him with burning eyes, and stern resolve upon every feature.

"No, but I warn you, Wildbird," was the low response, and the deep tones of the man trembled.

"And I defy your warning, my gallant colonel of prairie cut-throats," and the woman broke forth in ringing laughter, that startled all who heard it, for it was laughter without merriment, but instead, defiant, and, in spite of its sweetness, almost demoniacal.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLACK SPECTER MEANS BUSINESS.

THE defiant manner and words of the Black Specter, as she was called on the plains, and Wildbird, as the Mad Colonel called her, for a moment seemed to impress the chief strangely, and he paced to and fro, evidently deeply moved.

Then he halted and turned upon the woman, who looked grandly beautiful in the fire-light, as she stood before him, her form drawn up, and her attitude that of scorn and defiance.

"Wildbird, don't wound your wings beating them against the cage I keep you in, for it will do no good," he said, in a low, earnest tone.

"It will do this good, chief, that I will warn yonder train of who and what you are, and they will resist to the bitter end; ay, sooner than you should harm one of the name of Malcolm, I will ride to the fort myself and tell the commandant that his troopers are needed."

"You will do no such thing. Did I suspect it, I would at once bind those shapely limbs of yours, and send you a prisoner to my mountain retreat, while I wreaked a vengeance upon every one who bears the name of Malcolm."

"No, no, no! you would not do this cruel deed," cried the woman, her courage breaking down under the iron will of the man.

"I will do them no harm for they might as well live here as elsewhere; but you must swear to me that you will not betray to them our secret, or in any way give warning to the train of the movements of my Tigers or Black Kettle's savages. Do you swear as I wish?"

He turned his piercing eyes upon her, and her whole form quivered with emotion; but that she would yield was evident, as she seemed entirely swayed by his influence for wrong-doing.

"Do you promise—ay, swear?"

"If I refuse?" she almost whispered.

"Then I shall kill, and you know my threats are not idle."

"No, no, no! you must not do greater wrong than you have done; I swear to do as you wish."

"Enough. Now, to prove to you that I know you will keep your oath, I send you to the Indian line, to tell Black Kettle the chief to come here and see me."

"I will go."

"Of course you will and not betray me, either, as I well know, Wildbird. You must also approach the timber as near as possible, and ascertain what kind of a watch the emigrants keep."

"I will."

By some sudden impulse he drew her toward him, and imprinted a kiss upon her forehead, and then calling to her horse, raised her lightly to her saddle, and without a word she rode away, disappearing from sight out upon the prairie, for gathering clouds were shading the moonlight.

Riding along the rise of the prairie for some distance, she suddenly drew rein, for before her, prostrate upon the ground, she beheld several dark forms.

In an instant her rifle was swung round for use, and in a clear, fearless tone she cried out:

"Stand! or you die!"

The answer startled her, for there came the earnest cry, in a man's deep voice:

"Fly! for your life, fly! I am a prisoner to these Dog Soldier Sioux."

Instead of obeying, the women said, in perfect Sioux:

"Are these the braves of Black Kettle?"

Up from the grass then arose two Indians in all their war toggery, and one of them answered in his native tongue:

"The warriors of the Black Kettle have the eyes of an owl; they see in the dark, and they knew the Black Shade of the Tiger braves; they await the words of the squaw of the Mad Chief."

"I was going to seek thy chief, braves; the white-faces lie encamped over the prairie, and they are strong and well armed, and the Mad Chief would hold counsel with the Black Kettle."

"The Black Kettle is off on the prairie; he mourns for the chief Bad Hand and many braves, slain by the Iron Face of the Plains," said the Indian, sadly.

"I will seek him; but who is it you have there as prisoner?"

"A pale-face brave; the red-men call him *Napska*, and he is the medicine-chief of the Winnebagoes, but the foe of the Dog Soldier Sioux."

"Ha! have you as prisoner the one whom the whites call Fancy Frank?" asked the woman, quickly.

"The Black Specter has spoken straight; it is the White Beaver, and when we return to our lodges he must die."

For a moment the woman remained silent, and then she addressed the guide in English:

"Are you he whom men call Fancy Frank?"

"What there is left of me," was the laconic reply.

"How did you get into this scrape?"

"Rode right upon the red devils who were lying down upon the prairie, and turning to fly, my horse trod in a prairie-dog hole and fell with me, and here I am."

"You take it coolly, sir."

"What is the use to fret? For myself I care little; there is but one time to die and I have gone hand in hand with grim Death so long, I look upon him as a friendly pard to help me out of trouble some day."

There was something in the man's philosophical tone and manner that impressed Wildbird, and she felt drawn toward him most kindly, for her association with the Prairie Tigers had not made her wholly callous, and she said, with a sigh:

"I am sorry I have not the power to release you, and yet I know the Indians will kill you."

"Oh, I know that; but if I was certain of one thing, and had accomplished a duty I had set out to do, I would care but little, for life is hardly worth the living."

"True, true, true," broke from the woman's lips most earnestly; but, as though ashamed of her feelings' having betrayed her, she said quickly:

"Can I aid you in finding out what you would know?"

"Yes, perhaps; where is the Man of the Iron Face?"

"In the timber with the train."

"Thank God! These red devils lied to me and said they had killed him, and I feared it, for I did not see how he could live, doing what he did this afternoon. Why, he bears a charmed life."

"So it would seem, from all I have heard regarding him, and you, too, are said to be bullet and arrow proof."

"Wish 'twas so; now tell me, where are the Mad Colonel and his cut-throats?"

"How should I know?"

"Oh! I know who you are."

"Who am I?"

"In the camps you are called the Black Specter; the Indians have named you Wildbird, and rumor has it that you are the wife of the Mad Colonel, and serve him as a lieutenant, at times, and at other times as—"

"Go on, as what?" she asked, in a constrained voice, as the man paused.

"As a decoy to lead the unsuspecting into the clutches of the Prairie Tigers."

"And you believe this?" she asked, sadly.

"I know not what to believe; but I know you to be a member of the Mad Chief's band, for I have seen you in his camp, and but now you told these Indians that the Colonel had sent you for Black Kettle, for I speak Sioux myself."

"Ah! now tell me if you were the guide of the train in yonder motte?"

"Yes."

"Where was it heading?"

"To seek homes on the South Platte."

"You know Major Malcolm?"

"Yes."

"And his family?"

"All of them."

"Why have they come to this wild land?"

"Misfortune of some kind overtook them in their old home, I believe, and the major sought these Western prairies, as many others have done, to build up his shattered fortunes."

"Poor man, he little knew where he was coming! But tell me, do you think he would take your advice?"

"He might."

"I mean not as a guide, but as a friend!"

"Perhaps."

"Will you promise to do as I wish, if I make you a free man?"

"Better not attempt it, for it will but get you into trouble."

"I will look after that."

"I am Black Kettle's prisoner, and if you release me, it will get the Mad Chief into trouble with the Dog Sioux."

"What care you?"

"Oh, nothing; it was you I was thinking of, for I wish that old Kettle and the Mad Colonel would be like the Kilkenny cats."

"Promise to do as I wish, and I will set you free."

"What do you wish?"

"That I will tell you, if you will meet me the third night from this at the ruined stockade ten miles to the north of here."

"I know it; but I cannot promise, with my hands and feet bound, and these savages sitting on me like coroners on a corpse."

The woman made no reply, but her actions certainly spoke louder than words, for her hand was thrust forward, two sharp reports followed, and the two red-skin guards dropped dead in their tracks!

CHAPTER XIII.

MAN OR SPOOK.

HARDLY had the report of the pistol-shots died away, when the Black Specter was upon the ground, and with her keen knife had severed the bonds of Fancy Frank; and, while he was stretching his cramped limbs, she performed a like service for the splendid white steed that had been bound also, and lay near his master.

"Well, you have released me with a vengeance," said the scout in great surprise at the daring act of the woman, and turning toward her as though to thank her.

But she waved him away, and cried, hastily: "You are free, now ride for your life, but meet me as I request. Quick! for my shots will bring the Tigers and Indians upon us."

"And you?"

"Oh, go! Never mind me; go!" she cried, impatiently.

Without a word he took his arms from the side of the dead Indians, and threw himself into the saddle; then he paused, and she once more cried:

"Will you go? Do you not hear rapid hoof-falls coming?"

"Yes; I will be at the ruined stockade; goodbye!"

Wheeling the noble white steed he bestrode, he darted away like an arrow from a bow, and disappeared over the rise of the prairie, while the woman lightly sprung into her saddle, and, at a word to her horse, he sped away from the scene where a tragedy had been enacted; and, just in time, for both Prairie Tigers and Sioux, who had heard the shots and seen the flashes, were hastening toward the spot.

But, hardly had the woman gone a dozen paces, when, glancing behind her, she saw a horseman dash up to the spot, where lay the dead Indians, and, drawing rein, leap to the ground.

That he was not a red-skin she felt certain, and was half-inclined to come to a halt to see who he was; but the coming of the warriors and Tigers, whom her two shots had alarmed, caused her to dash on once more, not caring to be found near the scene, as questioning from the Mad Colonel might bring out some ugly facts she wished to remain unknown.

An instant only did the Black Specter hesitate, and then away sped her swift steed, urged on by whip, now, for his rider saw that the strange horseman had only halted momentarily at the spot, and then remounting, came on in pursuit of her.

"He has discovered me and follows; but I need not fear him mounted on you, my Bird of the Prairie," she said, leaning forward and patting her horse affectionately.

But, hardly had she gone a hundred yards, when she saw that her pursuer was gaining, in spite of the speed of her horse, and with surprise that Ebony had a second time found his match, she urged him on to greater exertions.

Smarting under the lash, which seldom touched his glossy hide, the fleet animal sped on at a pace that would have kept up with a gale of wind, but, steadily gaining upon him, came his pursuer.

Glancing over her shoulder, Wildbird saw that the horseman sat upright and motionless in his saddle, and was using no effort to urge his steed on, the splendid animal apparently running at his own will, and evidently capable of far greater speed if driven hard.

"I would discard even you, Ebony, to own that horse," muttered Wildbird, and she again plied the lash to her straining animal, while she said, half-reproachfully:

"A second time within twelve hours you have met your match, for that Indian horseman held his own against us this afternoon, and this horse is your superior, for he gains steadily; but you can do no more, my beauty, and I must aid you."

As she spoke, she brought her small repeat-

ing-rifle around for use, and, dropping the reins upon the neck of her horse, she turned in her saddle and raised the weapon to her shoulder.

Her pursuer was now within fifty yards, and coming silently on, yet steadily gaining at every bound of the splendid brute he rode.

Watching her opportunity, when her horse was steadiest, she fired, and the flash illumined the prairie for an instant, and the sharp crack was heard by the group of Indians and outlaws, grouped around the two dead red-skins.

As the smoke drifted from before her vision, Wildbird gazed eagerly toward her pursuer, expecting to see his saddle empty, for she had perfect confidence in her aim.

But, to her intense surprise, the rider sat as silent and motionless as before, and his steed still pressed on.

Again she fired, and with a like result; and then again and again; but the pursuer remained as before.

What could it mean?

She had herself loaded her rifle, and she knew well the accuracy of her aim.

She was not naturally superstitious, yet she had so long dwelt among men who believed in spooks and spirits, and had herself so often played the phantom, that a chill of dread began to creep over her brave heart, and she had hardly the strength to raise her rifle for a sixth shot.

"I will try once more, and then if I do not kill him, I will know that he is not human, for my aim never fails," she muttered, in a half-scared tone, and once more the repeating rifle flashed, and with straining eyes she eagerly watched the result.

And there was a result, but one unlooked for and undesired by the woman.

The rider still remained silent and motionless in his saddle; but his horse suddenly sprung forward with increased speed, and with a few mighty bounds was almost alongside of Ebony.

Almost reeling in her saddle, and driven nearly to desperation at the silent pursuer who was bullet-proof, Wildbird hastily drew a revolver and fired in the face of the man, now not a length from her.

But, ere her eyes had recovered their sight from the blinding flash, she felt a grasp upon her she could not shake off, and an arm encircled her waist with a power that proved she was wholly at the mercy of her pursuer, be he man, devil or phantom.

CHAPTER XIV.

IRON FACE AND HIS PRISONER.

WHEN the Man of the Iron Face left the emigrant encampment, or rather fort, for such it had become, he broke through the Indian line like a fiery whirlwind, and, with his miraculous good luck escaped unhurt, and sped away across the prairie at a pace that rapidly distanced the Indian ponies upon his trail.

Dropping them from sight he wheeled abruptly to the left, and headed for the spot where he had broken through the band on his way to join the train, feeling assured that several would be left there with the prisoner, who he felt was without doubt Fancy Frank.

Arriving at the spot he found that the Indians had gone, and slowly he was wending his way toward the distant camp-fires of the Prairie Tigers, whither he supposed the prisoner had been taken, and was arranging a plan to rescue him when suddenly he beheld a dark object in his front.

Instantly he halted, and the sound of voices reached his ears, and then came two rapid flashes and pistol-shots, a half-smothered cry, a quick, ringing order, and up from the ground arose the spectral-like form of a steed, and away over the prairie sped a horse and rider.

Drawing his revolver the Iron Face charged toward the spot, just as another horse and rider darted away, and a moment after he had dismounted and was bending over the lifeless form.

"There has been trouble here, and if I mistake not, the white horse I saw dash away was ridden by Fancy Frank; but who was the other?"

"That mystery I will first solve, for if Fancy Frank has escaped, he will at once rejoin the train."

So saying the Iron Face again sprung into his saddle and darted away on the trail of Wildbird, and, as the reader has seen, not only escaped death from her shots, but soon discovering that he was in pursuit of a woman, he rode silently on, trusting to the speed of Whirlwind to overtake her.

"Say that you will not attempt to escape, and I will release you from my grasp," said the Man of the Iron Face, as he held the woman firmly in his arms, the two horses running along side by side together.

Reassured by his voice and strong grasp, Wildbird felt that she had to deal with no spook, and said, quietly, yet still in a voice that was tremulous:

"I promise you, for I am in your power."

Instantly she felt herself free, and the Man of the Iron Face said:

"Now draw rein, for I would talk with you." Whirlwind, at a word from his master came

to a standstill, and Ebony halted by his side, and the two, the masked man and the veiled woman stood gazing upon each other.

The moon came out from between the drifting clouds, and the woman saw who it was that had been her captor, and the man felt that he had run down one who was a mystery upon the plains, and whose strange conduct caused many a weird story to be told in the Indian villages, and around the camp-fires of the hunters.

Often before he had heard of the Black Specter, and now he stood face to face with her, and not a feature of her face was visible, being hidden by a black veil that served as a mask.

And the woman too had heard many a strange story of the Man of the Iron Face, and knew that even the brave heart of the Mad Colonel had trembled for fear of him, and she now stood in his presence, and his prisoner.

"You said you wished to talk with me," she said, growing uneasy under the gaze of the eyes that looked upon her through the holes in the iron face.

"I do; who are you?"

"I am called the Black Specter, I believe, by those that do not know me," she answered, with a light laugh.

"And by those that do know you, what are you called?"

"Wildbird."

"A pretty name for an outlaw."

"Sir!" and there was anger in her tone at her implied character.

"You are a member of the Prairie Tigers?" he said, inquiringly.

"Who says this?"

"Rumor, and if rumor is true you are a very tigress."

"Rumor often dodges the truth," was the quiet answer, and it was a surprise to him, for he expected an outburst of temper.

"True, and for the sake of the womanhood you represent, I hope it is untrue."

"Perhaps men tell strange stories of you too, for many cruel deeds are laid upon the conscience of the Man of the Iron Face."

"True; but if I strike, it is with a motive, to wipe out with blood an injury," he said, in his deep tones.

"And may not a woman have injuries, too?"

"Hail you reason well; but, as I make no war against women, even though I know you to be one of the band of Prairie Tigers, I will ask of you a favor and allow you to depart."

"And that favor is—"

"To tell me if there is one in your band who answers to the name of Harvey Vertner?"

The woman started in spite of her nerve, but answered quietly:

"Why would you know?"

"Because I have tracked that man for years, and believe that at last I have located him as a member of the Tiger band. Is he with them?"

"Men leading the lives of outlaws on the plains, generally drop their real names," she answered, evasively.

"True, and he may have done so now, as he has before; but I ask you is Harvey Vertner a member of the Prairie Tigers?"

"I believe there is such a person in the camp."

"Will you bear him a message from me?"

"Yes."

"Tell him that he whom men call Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face, has registered a vow to take his life, and that he shall keep his vow."

"I will tell him; have you more to ask?" she said, coldly.

"Yes; who was it that killed those two Dog Soldier Sioux, back yonder on the prairie?"

"I decline to answer."

"Very well; was it Fancy Frank, the white Medicine Chief, that rode away upon a white horse just before you did?"

"Yes."

"Enough! now you are at liberty."

She half-turned her horse, and then said:

"Have you no desire to know what the intentions of the Mad Colonel are, regarding the train in the timber?"

"I know; it is to kill, and then to rob; he is as cruel as the savage on these prairies."

"Alas! that it is so," she said, sadly.

Then, after a slight pause, she asked:

"Is the train capable of a strong resistance?"

"That will be seen when the attack is made by Black Kettle and the Mad Colonel."

"Will you not be there to aid them?"

"I will not be far away—Hail who have we here?"

As he spoke, a steed and rider dashed over the ridge of the prairie, and behind him came two-score horsemen in full chase.

"Come! I retract my promise; you must go with me," cried the Man of the Iron Face, quickly; and seizing her bridle-rein, he urged her horse and his own into a rapid run, while hot on their trail came those behind them, and one glance was sufficient to show that they were the Tigers of the Prairie.

CHAPTER XV.

WILDBIRD'S SACRIFICE.

A VERY few rods had been run, when Iron Face made the discovery that his own steed and

the one ridden by the Black Specter could easily drop the Indians out of sight, while the white animal, coming along in their rear, seemed to need urging by his rider.

"Yonder man is Fancy Frank, if I may judge from his horse, and his pursuers are gaining upon him," said Iron Face to Wildbird, who had offered no resistance to being still held a prisoner, and had remained silent, perfectly passive in her captor's hands.

But at his words she now glanced behind her, and said, after an instant:

"It is the Medicine Chief, and the Indians are gaining upon him, for his horse seems fagged out."

"Then I will release you, and drop back to his aid," boldly said the Scout.

"No, I will suggest a better plan; I am a prisoner, so of course am in your power; my horse is, or rather was, I believed, until he met the animal you ride, the fastest on the prairie, so we'll drop back, and I'll change horses with White Beaver."

"It will be a dangerous risk for you to run."

"No, they already know that you hold the Black Specter prisoner, and will not fire, and you can tie me in the saddle, after I change horses with Napska, and leave me behind while you two ride on."

"And are you sure they will not harm you?"

"An Indian or Tiger harm the Black Specter?" she asked, with surprise, and then added:

"Oh, no! they will not harm me; but see, they have opened fire upon your friend, so we must act at once, would you save him."

"True," and instantly the two slackened pace, and in a few seconds the man on the white horse dashed up, and it was evident that the animal was hard pressed.

"Are you him whom men call Fancy Frank?" quickly asked Iron Face.

"I am; and you?"

"It matters not now; ride on with this lady and change horses."

"And you?"

"Will drop back and check those devils while you make the exchange."

"Pardon me, I'm not made of that kind of timber," was the haughty reply.

"Then halt here and make the exchange," was the rather impatient retort of the Man of the Iron Face, and checking his horse he suddenly threw his repeating rifle to his shoulder, and a perfect stream of fire came from its muzzle as it rattled forth its deadly and lively music.

At the same moment Fancy Frank and Wildbird had also drawn rein, and the woman cried:

"Quick, exchange saddles with me, for my horse is fresh, and as fleet as a bird."

"And you?" was the provokingly cool inquiry.

"I am your prisoner: left behind that you two might escape; here, tie my hands, and with your lasso make me fast in the saddle—oh, for the love of Heaven! hurry, for see they are pressing us, in spite of that man's deadly aim."

"I will make the exchange, though I dread to leave you."

"You leave me in the hands of my friends—quick!"

Fancy Frank now hesitated no more, for he saw that the Indians and Prairie Tigers were stretching out their lines to encircle them, and in a second almost the saddles were exchanged, and Wildbird bound in her own.

"Now mount and away; I will gradually drop behind, after you have passed out of immediate range, for they will not fire while I am with you," said the strange woman.

Wheeling their horses they again darted forward, and the repeating rifles of the two men kept their foes at bay, until they had merged beyond the two ends of the lines sent out to encircle them.

"Now you can leave me; farewell," cried Wildbird.

"You are a noble woman; may we some day meet again," said Iron Face in his deep tones; but, unheeding his words, she called out to Fancy Frank:

"Remember the rendezvous."

"I will not forget; farewell!"

Away now bounded the two steeds ridden by the men, leaving the white animal of Fancy Frank rapidly behind, a desertion that brought a reproachful neigh from the noble horse, who did not understand the desertion of his master.

"Well, sir, I owe my life to him whom men call Captain Crimson of the Iron Face, if I mistake not," said Fancy Frank, turning to his companion, as soon as he saw that the pursuers had overtaken Wildbird on his tired horse.

"You owe your escape to the splendid animal the Black Specter has placed at your disposal, and she it was that suggested the ruse, when she saw that your horse was failing you."

"Yes, poor Fleetfoot, as I call him, has been lying on his side, securely tied, all day, and it stiffened him up; but, he is very fast, though at his fleetest, he cannot hold pace with this animal, or the one you bestride; they seem fairly to fly."

"And my beautiful Whirlwind can drop that horse behind, easily," answered Iron Face, with

just pride in the noble beast that was his companion day and night.

"It seems hardly possible, and yet he seems running without an effort; but I have wandered from the subject of thanking you for my life."

"Do not speak of it; I learned of danger in the path of your train, so came to warn you, and ran upon those Dog Soldiers who held you prisoner."

"Yes, and went through them like a rocket."

"Reaching the train, I learned that you were absent, and having discovered you, as I passed, told Major Malcolm, and, acting in your stead, led the train to the timber where they are now fortified, while I came forth to look you up."

"It was very generous of you; but I had already escaped, and, in trying to reach the timber was discovered and pursued, and owe it to you that I am not again a prisoner, or dead; but, where did you meet the Black Specter, that remarkable woman of the Prairie Tiger band?"

"I saw two pistol flashes, and your departure, for I was not far away, and discovering the Black Specter gave chase, and had made her prisoner, when you dashed up with those devils hot upon your heels."

"I was fortunate in riding upon you; but see, we have dropped those fellows out of sight, so let us ride for the timber, as I wish to share the fate of those in the train, be it what it may."

"Do you see yonder timber island?" and the Man of the Iron Face pointed to where the horizon was broken by a dark object.

"Yes; it is over a mile away."

"Well, there I have a comrade awaiting me, and when I have sent him to the commandant of the fort, with a statement of the train's danger, we will break through the lines of our foes and join our friends."

Still pressing rapidly on, the two horsemen soon reached the little motte, and the dismal hoot of an owl greeted their ears as soon as they drew rein in the shadow of the trees.

Instantly the Iron Face answered with the long, melancholy howl of the wolf, and a sharp bark of a coyote followed.

"Red Snake is here," said the Man of the Iron Face, and, a few seconds after, a horseman appeared, and at a glance Fancy Frank saw that it was a tall, muscular Indian, dressed as a chief, and following him was a large, gaunt bay horse.

"Well, Red Snake, what news?" asked the Man of the Iron Face.

"The Tigers and Dog Sioux are friends, and make war upon the settlers," answered the Indian, in English.

"True; and their forces?"

"The Tigers are half a hundred; the warriors of the Black Kettle Red Snake did not count, for the Specter of the Hills chased him away."

"Ah! the Black Specter? Well, I will not blame you, Snake, for that woman is the only thing on earth you fear; now ride to the fort and see General Carr, and tell him that the Man of the Iron Face sends him word that Black Kettle and the Mad Colonel are allied against the Malcolm emigrant train, now encamped in the Dead Man's Motte, and help is needed; I will wait for you with the train."

"The Red Snake will do as the Iron Face asks," was the reply of the Indian, and mounting his horse, he rode away at a long sweeping gallop toward the north-west, while Captain Crimson and Fancy Frank turned the heads of their steeds in the direction of Dead Man's Motte, where anxious hearts watched and awaited their return.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE THREE ARRIVALS.

THOUGH Major Malcolm felt confidence in the new additions to the train, in the persons of Skeleton Sam and Rattling Rifle, he yet would have been better pleased had either Fancy Frank or the Man of the Iron Face been present, for both of them he had seen thoroughly tried.

Regarding the fate of his guide he could not but feel very anxious, for he had become deeply attached to him, and he was not so blind as to be unable to see that Maud was also interested in the handsome and dashing prairie rover, for he watched how anxiously she gazed out over the prairie, longing for the return of the Iron Face, who had promised her he would rescue Fancy Frank.

As the time crept on many of the women and children sought rest; but there was no sleep for Mrs. Malcolm, Maud and Violet, and the two maidens were constantly with the major, ever following him as he went the rounds of the timber each hour.

At length midnight came, and all was silent upon the prairie, and Skeleton Sam and Rattling Rifle had just come in and reported that the red-skins had placed a line of sentinels around the motte, and they supposed that the main bodies of Tigers and Sioux were encamped over on the creek, where the two chiefs were doubtless holding council as to the best mode of attack.

"And you think they will not attack to-night?" asked the major.

"Nary, pard; they hain't in no hurry, and

will leave you ter think they is goin' ter starve yer out, an' when they catches yer nappin' will pounce down on yer fer sartin."

"And you saw nothing of Mr. Harwood?"

"Nary; he has been scooped in."

"Captured?"

"Yas, pard, or kilt; he were a durned fool to go nosin' round on horseback as he did, an' ther reds hes doubtless raised his ha'r ter let a leetle sense in his cocoanut."

"I hope not so bad as that, Mr. Ledbetter," answered the major.

"Mister Ledbetter! waal, now, that is raal good, an' it's ther first I has been called by my name for so long I looked around ter see who you was talkin' to, pard; no, major, don't mister me; ef yer does ther wolves will be howlin' Led-b-e-t-t-e-r-r-r wherever I go," and Skeleton Sam pronounced his name in imitation of the howl of a wolf, and it brought forth a general laugh from all but the solemn-looking Rattling Rifle.

"Skeleton Sam are my name, an' I guesses I looks like it," he resumed, glancing at his long, bony limbs.

"Well, Sam, what do you think the chances are of the guide's being rescued by Captain Crimson?" asked the major, and both Maud and Violet showed increased interest at the question.

"Ef yer means by Capt'in Crimson thet Man with ther Iron Face, then I calkilates ther chances are good ter see ther guide back, for somehow thet queer indurwidool is a terror, tak' him as yer please—Hark!"

The sudden cry of Skeleton Sam caused every ear to be bent with attention to catch the slightest sound, and for a moment there was a dead silence.

Then was heard the rapid fall of hoofs out on the prairie, and several quick flashes and reports followed.

"Harwood is coming back!" cried Ross Elliott.

"Guess not; thar is two men comin', an'—oh, Lordy! jist hear that," cried Skeleton Sam, and wild, startling, terrible, arose the war-cry all in the train had heard before.

"The Iron Face, the Iron Face!" cried a dozen voices.

"And he is not alone," said Maud, in a low tone, but Skeleton Sam heard it, and answered:

"No, miss, thar is Injuns out thar whar he is, fer he hain't no man ter burn powder at shades, and give his war-cry to skeer away wolves."

"But is the Guide with him?" asked Maud, anxiously.

"I hain't no Gospil sharp, miss, ter see through darkness; but I hears two horses comin', an' I sees thet two riders is usin' weepens."

"Then it must be Frank—I mean Doctor Powell," she added, quickly, while the darkness alone prevented all from seeing the crimson flush that spread over her face.

"Waal, whoever it are with Iron Face, he's a shooter clean through, for ther weepens is rattlin' lively, an' they is headin' jist heur, an' ther horses is flyin' instead of runnin'."

As Skeleton Sam spoke again rung out the terrible war-cry of the Iron Face, and following it came another, but not in his voice, and a cheer arose from the motte, for the well-known, defiant whoop of Fancy Frank was recognized by all.

All eyes were now turned upon the two horsemen, who it was now seen had broken through the Indian line, and were coming on at a pace that brought expressions of admiration from all at the speed of their horses.

But had they passed unscathed through the deadly gantlet?

Such was the question upon every lip, and yet not one gave vent to it aloud.

A moment more, and there came in the deep tones of Iron Face:

"Clear the way behind that barricade!"

All darted one side, and up into the air shot the splendid black stallion, and over the high breastwork he went like a deer, to be followed immediately by the steed ridden by Fancy Frank.

Welcomes upon all sides now greeted them, but their first duty was to their noble horses, and then the two men came forward into the broad glare of the firelight.

And two more splendid specimens of manhood no eye ever gazed upon, and each person present allowed their eyes to roam in admiration from one to the other.

Of the same magnificent physique of the Man of the Iron Face, Fancy Frank possessed also the attraction of a remarkably handsome face, that was stamped with fearlessness, determination, and a certain manliness that was very winning.

He was dressed in a buckskin hunting-shirt, wore fringed leggins, top-boots, and a gray slouch hat with an immense brim, turned up upon the left side and fastened with an ivory pin, representing a white beaver, the name which the Winnebagoes had given him.

He was thoroughly armed with weapons of the latest improved patterns, and they were heavily gold-mounted, which circumstance,

added to his superbly embroidered buckskin suit and very neat appearance, had won for him the border cognomen of Fancy Frank, while his very courtly address and well-chosen language proved that he had been reared a gentleman.

With a curiosity he seldom bestowed upon a man, he turned upon Iron Face, as soon as they stepped into the broad glare of the fire, and scanned him from head to foot; but, as surely as in the darkness they had ridden together, the iron mask shut out all penetration, and the blank, iron features only were visible.

But, disguising his evident disappointment, Fancy Frank cordially extended his hand, and said in his pleasant way, while the eyes of the man who had rescued him were fixed upon his dark, handsome, yet somewhat sad face:

"Now, sir, I can thank you, for I owe to you my return to this train."

Iron Face grasped his hand, but answered quietly:

"Say rather to the fair lady in black, you owe your escape, for, though you did not tell me so, I am confident she released you from your captors."

"A fair lady in black?"

Involuntarily the words came from the lips of Maud Malcolm, but loud enough for several ears to hear, and seeing that the Iron Face had bent his gaze upon her cousin, Violet Vassar said, quickly:

"Come, Maud, these gentlemen must need refreshments of some kind, so let us prepare supper for them."

"Well thought of, Violet; come, gentlemen, over to my camp, and there we can make you comfortable for the night," said the major.

"Hold on, pards! I guesses thar's goin' to be a breeze o' some kind, fer look o' thar," and Skeleton Sam pointed out over the prairie to where a horseman was visible, coming at a rapid pace toward the timber.

All eyes were turned upon the stranger, and as he came nearer half a dozen voices called out:

"It is Dick Harwood."

The next instant he dashed into the timber, and cried out in startling tones:

"Quick! all gather here to beat back our foes, for yonder come the Mad Colonel and Black Kettle with all their forces," and he pointed to a dark mass of men and horses moving swiftly down upon the motte, and with cries of alarm the emigrants rushed toward the point of attack.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ATTACK AND RESULT.

"HOLD! let no man move without orders! back to your posts, all of you!"

The ringing voice of Iron Face checked every man as he was hastening, arms in hand, toward the side of the motte, upon which the band of horsemen were charging at full speed, with yells that were enough to strike terror to the stoutest heart.

"In Heaven's name! what mean you?" asked Major Malcolm, in alarm at the strange command of the Man of the Iron Face.

"I mean that yonder movement is but a feint, to draw your men to this point, while the real attack will be made at the other side of the timber."

"No, the entire force is yonder, for I have been watching them form for several hours," cried Dick Harwood.

"You are mistaken, sir; to your posts, men, as you were before, and you, Guide, come with me, for your repeating rifle will be needed," said the Man of the Iron Face.

"I has a peart talker, too, pard," put in Rattling Rifle, quietly.

"Then you and your pard come, too; major, we will take care of the other end of the motte, while you look after this; now, sir, you had better open on them," and, as the Iron Face, Fancy Frank and the Twin Pards, as Skeleton Sam and Rattling Rifle were called, darted across the timber, the howling mass of horsemen were near enough for the rifles of the emigrants to open upon them.

At a glance Major Malcolm saw that the attacking party was by no means as large as he had supposed, for, a close look through his glass, showed him that fully two-thirds of the horses were riderless, though their coming on with the others caused the Indians to appear three times the number they really were.

"Give it to them, men! throw no lead away!" called out the major, and the rapid fire of the emigrants brought a dozen ponies down, but still the others pressed on, until another line of fire burst out of the dark timber, and proved too much for Indian courage, for quickly the two-score braves wheeled to the right-about, leaving the ponies they were leading loose upon the prairie.

"The Iron Face was right—Ha!"

Hardly had the major spoken when there came a sound like muffled thunder from the other side of the motte, and then a terrific burst of fire-arms, followed by cries, war-whoops, oaths and stern orders.

"Maverick, you keep those fellows at bay, while I see how fare our friends upon the other

side," cried the major, and bounding through the timber he soon came upon a scene of desperate conflict, for, as the Man of the Iron Face had surmised, the main force, consisting of half a hundred Prairie Tigers, and three times that number of Indians, under their cruel chiefs the Mad Colonel and Black Kettle had advanced in silence upon the other side of the motte, believing that the feint made by two-score warriors and a hundred ponies would be believed to be the real onslaught, and draw the train defenders to that point of defense.

But, to their consternation, as they came silently over a rise of the prairie, and headed for the timber, they were met by a withering fire that made many a horse riderless, and strewn the ground with dead and dying men and beasts.

In the pauses between the volleys of the emigrants, the rattling of the repeating rifles of Iron Face, Fancy Frank and Rattling Rifle were heard, and were so surely aimed that the charging column wavered badly, and a second and third general discharge along the line, sent red-skins and outlaws back in confusion and terror, in spite of the rallying cries of the Mad Colonel, who, though being surprised, where he hoped to surprise, made a desperate effort to penetrate the timber.

Once broken, the combined forces of Black Kettle and the Mad Colonel quickly retreated, the Indians bearing off their dead, as is their custom, while the whites, more heartless than their savage allies, left their dying and dead comrades without a pitying glance.

Among the emigrants but one had been killed, and a few only wounded, for their high breastworks had protected them, and great was the rejoicing over their victory.

At last the gray of dawn appeared in the east, and as the sun arose over the prairie, not an Indian or outlaw, other than the dead, were to be seen, and anxious to go on, Major Malcolm was about to give the order for the train to resume its march, when Fancy Frank said:

"Oh, no, major, we must not leave here for some time."

"But the enemy have fled."

"True, Major Malcolm, but the Guide is right, you must remain here, as the departure of your foes only means a ruse to draw you away from your fort, out upon the open prairie, when they would pounce down upon you, and, doubtless, capture the train," said the man of the Iron Face.

"Well, you gentlemen certainly should know, and I will follow your advice, as to you we owe our present safety; well, Harwood, which way?" and Major Malcolm called out to Dick Harwood, who just then rode up, as if to take a ride over the prairie.

"I promised to accompany Miss Vassar for a short gallop on the prairie, major, now that the enemy have gone."

"It would be imprudent, I think."

"Why, are you going to break camp, sir?" asked the young man.

"No, not until I know just where our foes are."

"I may be able to bring you some information; I will promise to be careful, sir, and both Miss Vassar and myself are well mounted," persisted the young man.

The major was about to say decidedly that Violet should not go, when Iron Face said in a whisper:

"Let her go."

"All right, Harwood; but be careful, and do not go too far."

"Thank you, major; we will return in safety," and Dick Harwood rode over to the major's camp, where Violet, looking very beautiful in riding-habit and plumed hat, was awaiting him.

A few moments after the young man and maiden dashed out upon the prairie, and seeing them, the major turned to Iron Face.

"May I ask why you advised my allowing my niece to run the risk she must by a gallop on the prairie?"

"I will tell you my reasons, sir, upon my return," was the quiet response, and soon after the man of the Iron Face rode out of the motte, mounted upon Whirlwind, who looked as fresh as his master.

"That man has some deep motive in following Dick Harwood," said Fancy Frank.

"So his manner led me to believe when he asked me to permit her to do so foolish a thing as to let her go with Harwood, whom, I will frankly confess, I do not like."

"Nor I, though he seems a plucky fellow; but somehow I feel that I have met him before, though for the life of me I do not know when or where, yet it was not under pleasant circumstances, I'll swear."

"And what think you of the Man of the Iron Face, doctor?" asked the major, who often addressed the guide by his professional title, knowing that he had been a surgeon in the army.

"He is the bravest man I ever saw, and can do more than any one I ever met; he is a wonder, and I know that I have met him before, though his iron face prevents all recognition; the man is a mystery, and I would give much to see the features beneath the mask he wears,

and to know why he thus shields himself from the gaze of his fellow-men."

"And so would I; but it would be a bold man that would pry into his secret; but see, our foes are returning, and I have been foolish enough to let poor Violet go out upon the prairie," and Major Malcolm pointed to a distant rise, over which a body of horsemen were coming at a rapid gallop, and heading directly toward the motte.

CHAPTER XX.

FRIENDS OR FOES?

ABOUT the same time that Fancy Frank and Major Malcolm discovered the horsemen coming over the divide, they were seen by the train guards, and a general cry of alarm rung out; but the guide, at a second glance, saw that they were in uniform, and said quietly:

"I think they are cavalry, major."

"Yes, that is evident, and they are welcome guests, I can assure you, for now our troubles are over, and—"

"Hold! not so fast, major; ho! men, all! ready along the line, and fire on those devils if they come nearer, for it is a ruse of the Mad Colonel."

To say that the ringing words of Fancy Frank caused intense excitement, would be putting it mildly, for all in the motte, excepting the guide, saw but a squadron of cavalry coming toward them.

But Fancy Frank seemed in earnest, and a whistle calling Ebony to his side he sprung upon him and rode out to meet the apparent troopers, who were now not a quarter of a mile distant, and still coming on at a rapid gallop, their jingling spurs and rattling sabers making merry accompaniment to the hoof-falls of their steeds.

Every eye was now upon the man who had made such a bold charge against the coming horsemen, and all waited breathlessly as he dashed toward them, and suddenly halting threw up his hands, as though to check their advance.

Then they heard his voice ring out clear and firm:

"Ho! the motte; be ready, for these are foes."

Suddenly to the rightabout he wheeled, and sped like the wind back to the motte, into which he dashed several hundred yards in advance of the men he had denounced foes.

"Major Malcolm, those are Tigers, disguised as cavalry; give it to them, boys!" cried the guide, and leaping his horse over the barricade, he sprung to the ground, and throwing his rifle forward was about to touch the trigger, when the major seized his arm.

"For Heaven's sake, Powell, do not be rash, for I believe you are mistaken."

"No, there is no mistake; I saw faces there that I know, and if we do not open upon them, they will dash right in; see, all those in the rear are red-skins," and as the guide spoke he pulled the trigger, and down to the ground went a rider, while the line wavered, as though taken by surprise, and came to a sudden halt, while a stern voice called out:

"What means this murderous fire upon United States soldiers? Hold! I command you."

"Ha! I told you, Powell, you were too hasty," cried the major.

The guide returned no reply to the major, but answered:

"Ha! ha! ha! my cunning colonel, you thought to play a clever trick; but I know you, and shall treat you like the murderer you are, if you come nearer with your red pack."

There was a silence of a few moments, and the commanding officer was seen in earnest consultation with some of his officers; then he answered in the same deep, stern tones:

"Emigrants, that man is entrapping you into trouble; we are from the river fort, and were sent to your aid by a friendly Indian; beware, before you fire upon us."

"I told you so, Powell; I fear you have made a mistake," said the major, anxiously.

"I have made no mistake, sir; what think you, Skeleton Sam?" asked the guide, turning to that individual, who had come up a moment before, accompanied by Rattling Rifle.

"I guesses yer is right, pard; them don't look like reg'lar sojers," was the answer.

"And you, Rattling Rifle?" asked Fancy Frank.

"We kin git along comfortable like without comp'ny jist now, pard," was the laconic reply.

This was enough for Frank Powell, and he again called out:

"Go back to the fort and say we don't need aid; we can take care of ourselves, and if you doubt it, my dear colonel, try us."

"Yis, jist try us on, an' yer'll find we'll fit as ef we was made for yer; I is sp'ilin' fer a row, an' when they turn me loose I are a howlin' pararer fire lookin' fer dry grass," yelled Skeleton Sam, and he added, as he glanced at Rattling Rifle:

"And I has a twin baby-brother hear thet is green-lighnin' looking fer somethin' to strike, of yer rile him."

"Attention, squadron! forward—"

But what more was said by the supposed cavalry commander, was drowned by the stern order of Fancy Frank:

"Ready, all! aim well! fire!"

A line of flame shot forth from the timber, just as the horsemen moved forward, and the result was deadly, for, when the smoke drifted away, there was one thing very evident—the squadron was in full flight, excepting several comrades and a half-dozen horses left on the prairie, dead or dying.

As they fled, Fancy Frank again called the black horse of Wildbird to his side and was soon out upon the field examining the dead, one of whom he took up in his arms, and carrying him back to the motte, threw him down before the major, saying, quietly:

"Well, sir, paint and a uniform cannot make an Indian a white man."

"Powell, again we owe you our lives, for, but for you, Death would now be stalking boldly through this encampment," and the major grasped Fancy Frank's hand, warmly, while Maud Malcolm glided forward and said, earnestly:

"And I, too, thank you, Dr. Powell," and then, with a glance of alarm, she continued:

"But, has not Violet returned?"

"Not yet, I am sorry to say," answered the guide.

"Oh, how wrong in me to let her go, for, alas! she may be forever lost to us," almost groaned the major—"Ha! who is it comes yonder, Powell?" and the eyes of all, at his words, were turned far out upon the prairie.

"It is the Man of the Iron Face, and—"

"And what?"

The question broke from several lips as the guide paused; but, with an effort at indifference, he continued:

"And he is alone."

"Pard, thar's somethin' ahind him," said Skeleton Sam.

All looked at the speaker, and then again at the coming horseman, and then beyond him, and every face blanched, while Fancy Frank, in a hoarse whisper, gave vent to the cause:

"Great God! the prairie is on fire."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BANDIT LOVER.

To look upon the faces of Dick Harwood and Violet Vassar, when they rode forth from the motte, for a gallop over the prairie, one would not believe that either of them had a care in the world.

Their horses seemed to feel like going rapidly, and pulled on their bits with a will, and a league had been gone over before Violet seemed to remember her uncle's warning.

But it was from no love-sick sentiment, of being unconscious of all else in the society of Dick Harwood, for though she admired the young man immensely, thought him very handsome, the best of company, and they had sung duets together night after night in camp, she yet seemed a little shy of his becoming more to her than he was.

A natural flirt, she was willing to lure him on, for, unhurt herself, she did not have thought of the bitterness of heart she might cause him, should she cast him aside when he should offer himself, for, with a woman's intuitive knowledge of such things, she was confident that he intended to lay his heart and hand at her feet.

After riding along until the motte was lost sight of, and the prairie began to become more rolling, until it merged into the foot-hills of a lofty ridge of wooded land, Violet bethought her that it was very unwise for her to go thus far from the camp, especially after the dangers of the past night, and her uncle's request; but then Dick Harwood had told her that the Tigers and Indians had certainly departed, and that he wished her to go to a canyon he knew of, which was filled with the most beautiful of wild flowers, and, confident in the speed of the blooded mare she rode, and which she knew came of good racing-stock, she had been enticed on and on, until at last with real alarm she drew rein, exclaiming:

"Oh, Mr. Harwood, we must be a dozen miles from camp."

"And what are a dozen miles, to our horses at least, Miss Violet? But see, yonder canyon is the one I seek," and he pointed to a break in the ridge, about a quarter of a mile distant.

"Well, so far, and no further," she said, gayly, and within five minutes more they had entered the canyon.

Dick Harwood had spoken the truth, for the sides of the canyon were filled with lovely flowers, and springing to the ground unaided, Violet soon had her hands filled with sensitive roses, indigo plants, and numerous other wild specimens, that enraptured her with their beauty.

Presently Dick Harwood approached her, with a sensitive rose in his hand, and pointing to its leaves, that close at the human touch, he said, earnestly:

"Violet, such power have you over my heart, for it feels your touch, your every look, and in my eyes, you, my Violet of the sunny South are far more beautiful, than the most gorgeous flower that blossoms on these prairies."

Violet gave a joyous, ringing laugh, and answered lightly:

"Why, Mr. Harwood, it is worth the ride here to hear such a pretty speech, even if this canyon were as desolate as the desert."

"I speak but the truth, Violet; you are the one who must guide my future destiny."

"Must is a strong word to use, Mr. Harwood," she answered, in a tone of slight pique.

"I mean it, Violet, for with you my life will be one of bliss, and without you, only sorrow will be mine."

"And wedded to one I did not love would make my life wretched, Mr. Harwood, so which must it be, your unhappiness, or mine?"

"You imply that you do not love me," he said, quickly, and his face flushed with anger.

"You read aright, sir; I do not love you."

"Ha! can this be?" and his tone had a disagreeable ring in it.

Nettled at his manner, she answered:

"If your vanity has allowed you to consider my admiration of your very fine tenor voice, enjoyment of your brilliant conversational powers, and pleasure in your society, as love for you, then you must condemn your own conceit, and I must bridle my tongue and veil my eyes in future, lest every word and look be misunderstood."

"And yet you have led me to believe that you loved me," he said.

"Your conceit led you astray, sir; but come, I have as many flowers as I can carry, so let us return to camp, and once out of this canyon, Mr. Harwood, let us forget the thorns and remember only the roses."

Violet Vassar, you have trifled with a heart that has you imaged upon it, and I beg, and I implore that you listen to my love," and he grasped her hand.

"You have my answer, Mr. Harwood; release my hand, please," she said, haughtily.

"Never! I have offered you my love, and for you my whole life was to know a change, for I have money enough to live on, and far from here I was to dwell with you as my wife—"

"A one-sided arrangement certainly, sir," she said, with biting sarcasm.

"And a one-sided arrangement it shall remain, Violet Vassar, for where Dick Harwood makes up his mind to possess anything he gets it, cost what it may."

"Do you threaten a woman, sir?" she asked, still keeping a fearless flash in her beautiful eyes, though her heart fluttered with terror, for his face had lost its winning smile, and a cruel look of reckless determination marred the beauty of his features.

"I ask you to go with me and become my wife," he said.

"And I say never!"

"Then you shall become what I choose to make you," he said, savagely.

"Coward! you dare not carry out your threat."

"Violet Vassar, you are mistaken, for I am not what I am believed in your camp to be."

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"I will tell you in a word; I came West to become a rancher; but I cheated in a game of cards, was detected, and killed my accuser, and public opinion, a merciless tyrant, drove me for safety to ally myself with a band of outlaws, of which I am now second in command, and known as Devil Dick, and my chief is known as the Mad Colonel."

She stood like a statue of marble while he coolly told his story of crime, and though her lips parted, she said no word, and he went on, after a short pause:

"I joined your train to lead it to destruction, but I saw you, and I loved you, and now swear to give up my evil life and go with you far from here, if you will be my wife; what say you now, my beautiful Violet?"

"Sooner would I die by my own hand," broke from her white lips.

"But you know that I have the power to make you obey me?"

"Never!" and the beautiful eyes burned defiantly.

"You put on a bold face, fair girl, for one at the mercy of a wicked man, who fears neither man or the devil."

"Never shall your touch pollute me, even though your crimes have won you the name of Devil Dick," she said, scornfully.

"And who will prevent?"

"I will."

The two words, spoken in a deep, stern voice, brought a glad cry from the lips of Violet Vassar, and a smothered oath from Devil Dick, who wheeled quickly, his hand upon his revolver butt, to discover, standing in the mouth of a ravine, not ten feet distant, a tall form, with rifle leveled at his heart.

It was the Man of the Iron Face, and his manner and words were ominous, for he said:

"I have the drop on you, pard, so throw up your hands, or I fire."

CHAPTER XXII.

CHASED BY DEATH.

At the stern order of the Man of the Iron Face, for Dick Harwood to "throw up his hands," that personage saw that there was but

one alternative to escape instant death, and that was to obey.

He was a man who took desperate chances with his life; but here he knew there was no chance to take, it was certain death to refuse.

Did he obey, the Man of the Iron Face would only hold him as a prisoner, and he had been in duress vile often before, and been taken care of by his namesake, Satan, so he said in an indifferent tone:

"You speak the truth, pard; you have the drop on me, so up go my hands."

He held them above his head as he spoke, but his quick eye was ready to take the slightest advantage, should Iron Face lower his rifle, for he knew that few men could draw and fire a revolver as quickly as he could.

But though nothing could be seen behind that iron face to indicate that its owner suspected Devil Dick of treachery, it is certain that he was suspected, for Iron Face walked straight toward his prisoner, his rifle still pointed at his heart, and only stopped when the muzzle pressed his breast.

"Now, sir, I will clip the Tiger's claws," said the Man of the Iron Face, at the same time relieving Dick Harwood of the revolvers and knife in his belt, and placing them in his own.

Having done this, he dropped his rifle, and seizing the uplifted hands in both his own, in spite of the great strength of the bandit lieutenant, he bent them down, as a man would a child's, and forcing them behind him, a sudden click, click was heard.

"Curses upon you! you have ironed me," cried Dick Harwood, turning pale.

"True, you have a pair of bracelets on that I carried for other wrists, but they will serve in this case very well; now, sir, I wish to aid you to mount."

Iron Face led the way to where the prisoner's horse was feeding, while Violet, to whom not a word had been spoken, and who stood like one awakening from a hideous nightmare, gazed on in silence.

With an exhibition of his wonderful strength Iron Face placed his prisoner in the saddle, and then, with rawhide thongs, quickly tied his feet beneath his horse, after which he turned to Violet, and said, pleasantly:

"Now, Miss Vassar, it will give me pleasure to escort you back to camp."

"Oh, sir, what do I not owe to you?" she cried, and with her words came a flood of tears, as she grasped the hand of Iron Face.

"I owe more to you, Miss Vassar, for through your courage in taking this long ride, I have been enabled to run to earth a man whom I have suspected as a villain since I first met him with your train; but come, danger may yet lie before us, so I would not tarry here."

Roused by his words, Violet dried her eyes, and was lifted in his strong arms and placed in her saddle, after which Iron Face secured the steed of Dick Harwood with his lariat, and the three turned their horses' heads campward, the Scout and the maiden riding side by side, and the animal, with his bound master, trotting along behind.

As if forgetting the scene he had just passed through, the Man of the Iron Face began to entertain Violet with stories of the border, and so brilliant a talker did she find him, so soft and winning was his voice, and about him hung such a mystery, that the maiden became more and more interested in him, and felt in her heart that she would give much to see what lay beneath that iron face.

But, as they rode along Violet noticed that the Man of the Iron Face cast frequent glances around them, and that he had some cause of alarm she knew and was convinced when he said:

"Come, let us urge our horses on, Miss Vassar."

"Is there an enemy in sight, sir?" she asked, somewhat anxiously.

"Yes," was the short reply, and it caused both Violet and Dick Harwood to glance behind.

What they saw blanched both faces, and Devil Dick called out in thrilling tones:

"An enemy, yes! the prairie is on fire!"

By common consent the three horses now bounded forward, for suddenly around the ridge of hills, or rather through a vale-like opening that divided it, came a towering column of flame and smoke, like some huge, fiery serpent rushing across the prairie.

"The wind is behind us, and blowing strong; we must ride for it," said the Man of the Iron Face, calmly, and leaning over he grasped Violet's bridle-rein, and away sped the three horses.

Violet, as pale as death, for her mind was full of the stories of prairie fires, was still calm and kept her presence of mind, though she felt that she would undergo any danger, could she but see the expression on the face beneath that iron mask.

"If I could only see his face I would read what is to be our fate; but now I have little hope, for, fast as my horse is, yonder roaring flames come faster," she murmured, and another glance behind showed her that the fire had reached the prairie this side of the ridge, and was now extending its flaming legions on either side, to grasp the whole prairie in its burning embrace.

From the torrents of fire rolling irresistibly on, she looked at the face of the prisoner, and her eyes met his gaze.

His face was pale, yet upon his lip was an expression of recklessness, and seeing her look he said sneeringly:

"Well, sweet Violet, had you accepted my offer, your fair form would escape yonder devouring flame, for I tell you there is no hope for you, or any of us."

"And I tell you, sir, that you lie," was the calm retort of the Man of the Iron Face.

"Ha! you fling the lie in the teeth of a prisoner; it is cowardly."

"It is not as cowardly as your conduct to an innocent girl you held in your power, and I repeat, when now you would take from her all hope, that you lie, for there is hope for her."

"Wherein lies it?" insolently responded Devil Dick.

"In flight."

"We are now going as fast as our horses can carry us, and yonder flames are overtaking us rapidly—see! my horse is failing now."

"I said not there was hope for you."

The words and manner of the Scout drew the eyes of the prisoner and of Violet upon him, for what could his strange reply mean?

And even Devil Dick felt a tremor of horror, as he asked:

"What mean you?"

"That your horse is failing rapidly; see, he stumbles now."

"And would you leave me here in irons to die a death so fearful?" cried the now thoroughly frightened outlaw.

"I cannot save you, but I will not be unmerciful," and Iron Face dropped back alongside the straining horse ridden by his prisoner, and released the lariat from his bit, and then, taking a key from his pocket, he removed the iron handcuffs from his wrists, saying quietly:

"I would perhaps be merciful to put a bullet through your brain, and doubtless, if you escape, I will regret not doing so; but you are free; go where you please."

But though freed of his irons the outlaw felt no desire to part company at such a time, and with lash and spur urged on his struggling steed.

But to no purpose; the noble animal had taxed his strength too far, and was tottering badly at every bound, while the blood streamed from his nostrils.

A few more bounds and down he went, and the Man of the Iron Face half drew up his horse, as though in mercy; but a cry from Violet recalled his attention to her, and he saw that her steed, too, must soon go down, and then the outlaw was left to his fate, standing in the path of the howling, roaring, crackling flames like one gone mad with fright.

One glance behind and they saw him standing thus, his hands over his face, as though to shut out the sight of death in its most hideous form, and then they sped on; but alas! weakened from abject fear, the high-strung animal ridden by Violet was swaying wildly, and the Man of the Iron Face saw that he, too, must go down, and the look on the maiden's face showed that she, too, realized the awful truth in all its horror.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIRE KING.

"Oh my poor, poor Turk," cried Violet Vassar, forgetting herself, in her sorrow for her nobly-struggling but failing horse, and turning to the man of the Iron Face, as he rode by her side, she continued:

"It seems so cruel to urge him with the whip, when he is doing his best for me."

"The brute creation must ever suffer for the human, Miss Vassar," was the calm reply, and he added, as Turk again swayed badly:

"Pardon me, but you must let me save you now."

Leaning over as he spoke he passed his arm around her slender waist, and, with a skillful movement, seated her behind him, paying no attention to her sudden exclamation of surprise at the unexpected act.

Released of his burden Turk again made an effort for life, for behind him came the Fire King, and he knew his danger as thoroughly as did his mistress know hers.

But once having decided that in the speed of Whirlwind only was there hope, Iron Face gave the noble beast rein, and even with his extra weight he sprung forward in a way that proved he deserved the name he bore, for Turk was at once dropped behind and left to his fate.

"My poor, poor Turk," moaned Violet, as she glanced back and saw the terror-crazed animal struggling on still, neighing wildly, and yet surely being overtaken by the fire, the warmth of which the maiden could now feel upon her fair cheek.

Lost in astonishment at the wonderful strength, endurance and speed of Whirlwind, Violet momentarily forgot her own danger, until recalled to it, by a louder roar and fiercer crackling than before, as the flames struck a richer growth of grass, and once more her eyes were turned behind her and a moan escaped her lips, for nowhere was poor Turk visible.

But would not her fate be as awful? she thought, as before them it seemed there was no safety, and behind them came the fiery gale, gaining steadily, in spite of Whirlwind's great speed.

Nearer and nearer came the fire, but no word came from the man that had proven her preserver, excepting an occasional encouragement to his horse.

"On, Whirlwind, old fellow: you are doing nobly, my king of steeds, but keep it up, for all depends upon you."

And, as though determined to show his master that he knew all that depended upon him, the splendid animal bounded forward with increased speed, for, he had felt no cruel lash upon him, as he understood what was expected of him, and was doing his best.

And nearer and nearer came the fire, until its heat grew almost painful, and, with a glance ahead, Violet Vassar gave herself up for lost, and in her horror was about to cry to the silent man to speak one word to her ere they were engulfed in the flames; but, with the cry upon her lips, Whirlwind suddenly paused and quickly turned to the left.

"Great God! he has failed us!" she cried.

"Not so, here is a divide, and we are safe," was the stern response, and down the steep pathway into the ravine scrambled the splendid horse, and crouching down against the overhanging banks the man, the maiden and the horse awaited the passing of the Fire King.

A moment more and above their heads swept the sea of flame, roaring like the waves lashed into storm, and sending down into the divide a heat that would have been unbearable had not Iron Face quickly enveloped Violet in his serape, and then thrown a blanket over Whirlwind, and also protected his own head, for the iron face he wore would have been unendurable if exposed to the furnace-like air.

A short while they crouched thus, and then the heat grew less intense, the Fire King had broken at the divide, and then gone scurrying away up its course, driven by the wind, which had suddenly changed.

And out of the oven-like place came the two human beings and the brute, the latter panting hard after his superb effort, and the man's face hidden, the maiden's white, earnest, and her form trembling.

And around the neck of the noble horse Violet threw her arms, while she cried, in half-sobbing tones:

"Beautiful, noble Whirlwind, you have saved us."

"True, Miss Vassar, no other horse on these plains could have done what Whirlwind did, and had this divide been an eighth of a mile further away we should have perished."

The girl shuddered, and said almost in a whisper:

"As he has done."

"A fitting fate for one so vile; but my pity is for the dumb brutes, not for that man," was the stern reply.

"True, they were more merciful; but, sir, what do I not owe you for all you have done for me, and what danger have I not led you into from my silly whim for a ride this morning?"

"I am glad that it is as it is, Miss Vassar; but come, we must back to camp, for your friends will be most anxious regarding you; come, Whirlwind, old fellow, stir yourself once more," and as the horse gave a low neigh, Iron Face raised Violet to a seat behind the saddle, and mounting, by an agile spring, he gave his horse the rein, and away, at a swinging gallop, Whirlwind set off over the prairie for the encampment in the mottle, where an hour after they arrived in safety, and relieved the grief of Major Malcolm and the others, for, not seeing the maiden behind the Scout, they had almost given her up as lost, believing her either captured by the Prairie Tigers or destroyed by the Fire King.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNDER A CLOUD.

AFTER the warm greetings were over, and the Man of the Iron Face and Whirlwind had been extolled most highly, Ross Elliott stepped forward to offer his congratulations to Violet; but it was evident that the treachery of Dick Harwood cast its shadow on this other stranger, who had so mysteriously joined the train, and several cast scowling glances at the young man, who seemed intuitively to feel that he was an object of suspicion, for he shrunk back from observation as quickly as possible.

"He looks kinder squar', pards, but yer can't tell much by faces now, an' he mout be a kettie off o' ther trail o' honesty; hain't I right, Rifle?" and Skeleton Sam, who had been appealed to by a number of the emigrants for his opinion of Ross Elliott, turned to Rattling Rifle, who answered in his slow way:

"I guesses you is, pard, an' ther youngster mout be a Tiger, for who'd 'a' suspected thet t'other feller o' bein' Devil Dick o' ther Tigers?"

"Not a one, an' a Gospel sharp c'd only hev seen goodness creepin' out o' his face; but, pards, what a howlin' hyena in s'arch o' human bones that Iron Face critter be; I declar' to

ther Rockies he are b'iled thunder on ther war-path, an' he's my congregation fer life, you kin bet."

"He are wuss nor a nest o' young wild-cats, pard," was Rattling Rifle's tribute to the Man of the Iron Face, and the two quaint plainsmen went off to their little camp to cook their mid-day meal, leaving a constantly increasing crowd of emigrants discussing the probability of whether or no Ross Elliott was not a secret pard of Devil Dick, for a number of circumstances had come up, during the short time he had been with the train, to make them suspicious of him.

"I can tell you, my friends, that I saw several strange looks pass between Ross Elliott and Dick Harwood shortly after the former joined us last evening," remarked a young emigrant who seemed particularly bitter in denouncing the youth, whose attentions to Violet Vassar he did not like, as he himself was "sott" in that quarter, and had already built up air-castles of his future cabin home, presided over by the fair maiden.

"Carter Grey, I believe you are right; Ross Elliott was talking for a long time last night with Devil Dick, as we now know he was, and I tell you I think they were pards," answered another emigrant.

"I almost knows it," said a third.

"I believe if we don't end his days he'll end ours," remarked another.

"That's the talk; dead men ain't dangerous," cried a huge fellow, who was in for any mischief, while Carter Grey added:

"We have too much at stake in this train to be careless or merciful; I believe the boy is here to lead us into a trap, as Devil Dick led Miss Vassar."

"What says the Iron Face?" asked one.

"And Fancy Frank, our guider?" queried another.

"Oh, the Iron Face don't belong to the train, and as for Fancy Frank, he seems friendly toward the boy; but, what we do must be done quickly, and without their knowledge, for there would be some tender hearts to prevent us if they knew it," said Carter Grey.

"Better go slow, Grey," said Henry Maverick, who had not spoken before.

"No, Maverick, I feel convinced that Ross Elliott's presence here means mischief, and the only way to prevent it is to—"

The young emigrant paused, and several voices asked, in a low tone:

"What, Grey?"

"Hang him!" was the stern response.

"You are right; the fellow must be strung up, and at once," cried one who seemed bent on mischief.

And the seed thus sown ripened with amazing quickness, and ere ten minutes nearly two score men were clamoring for the life of Ross Elliott, and a messenger had been sent after him, for they wished to keep their deed from the sight of the women and children, and those of the men who might object to their summary course.

Henry Maverick endeavored to stem the tide of opinion, but he was hushed up, and the urging on of Carter Grey and several others carried all opposition by storm, and like wild beasts awaiting the coming of their prey, they crouched down in a distant thicket of the motte and bided their time.

Presently the messenger returned, and with him the victim, wholly innocent of the storm about to burst upon his young head, for he said, pleasantly, as he glanced over the set, pale, and frowning faces:

"Gentlemen, how can I serve you, for I am told you wished to see me?"

"We do, young man, or rather these gentlemen do, for I wash my hands of this work," said Henry Maverick.

"As before, I ask how can I serve you?" was the query of the youth, who now saw that something of deep import was on hand, and that he was connected in some way with it.

"We intend to serve you, Ross Elliott, as you would serve us, did we give you the chance," said Carter Grey, assuming the lead, as the eyes of all turned upon him, as if by common consent they would make him their leader.

"I do not understand your words, sir," was Ross Elliott's remark, though his face paled slightly.

"You shall fully understand; you have heard that Dick Harwood, the pretended cattle-king, turned out to be a traitor, in fact, none other than Devil Dick of the Prairie Tigers?"

"Yes, and though it may seem cruel, I think that he deserved the awful fate he met."

"Ah! I am glad to hear you say so, for you have passed sentence upon yourself," was Carter Grey's sneering retort.

"In God's name what do you mean?" gasped, rather than said, Ross Elliott.

"I mean that you came to this camp as did Dick Harwood—to betray us."

The young man dropped his hand on his revolver-butt, and his eyes flashed with indignation, either real or feigned; but a dozen pistols covered him in a second, and he said simply:

"You are cowards, to thus accuse me of guilt, because Dick Harwood was a traitor."

"We are just to look after the safety of

those we love, and suspicion pointing upon you as the secret comrade of Devil Dick, we will run no chances, but at once put you beyond doing harm."

"What! you surely cannot mean that you would kill me?"

"That is our intention; we will hang you," was the cold reply.

"Without any proof against me, you would commit murder?"

"Oh, we have proofs enough."

"I defy you to produce them."

"We thought Harwood a good fellow, and found him a Tiger; but talk is useless, and you must hang for it," said Carter Grey.

The young man dropped his face in his hands, and his whole form quivered with emotion; but he started suddenly as he felt a touch on his shoulder, and cried piteously:

"Oh, men, have ye no mercy? I am not what you believe; I am—"

"String him up!" came the stern order from Carter Grey, and the noose quickly thrown around his slender neck choked off further utterance, while the hands were quickly bound behind his back.

But instantly the bonds were severed, and the noose loosened by one who suddenly strode into the midst of the crowd, and said quietly, but in his deep, stern tones:

"Gentlemen, go slow."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CARTER GREY'S THREAT.

"HOLD on, my friend of the Iron Face, you are not interested in this affair," angrily cried Carter Grey, as that mysterious personage suddenly released Ross Elliott, and said quietly:

"Gentlemen, go slow."

"That depends, sir, as you shall see, if you mean harm to this youth," was the calm retort of Iron Face, who laid his hand upon the shoulder of the young man, who kept close to the Scout, as if knowing that he could protect him.

"We mean justice, for he is like the traitor we discovered, nothing more than a Prairie Tiger," said Carter Grey, with considerable show of anger.

"I, not you, sir, discovered that fact regarding Harwood, and it would take much to make me believe this youth guilty of evil."

"Well, we suspect him, and we shall hang him; ready, boys, for we must not let this fellow bully us."

"I shall do more, if you lay a hand on this youth," was the very calm, but firm response.

"And what will you do?" sneered Grey.

"You have but to attempt to injure this young man to ascertain."

"By Heaven! I'll see if you dare put yourself against us," and Carter Grey sprung forward to place his hand upon Ross Elliott, but fell like a log, for the seemingly iron fist of the Scout met him fairly with a blow between the eyes, and he lay stunned at the feet of the youth he would have injured, while, with angry glances the emigrants pressed around, their hands upon their weapons.

But Iron Face was neither intimidated or excited, and said calmly:

"Gentlemen, do not press me, or there will be wailing in this camp! but I shall protect this youth, come what may."

"Bravo! Iron Face, and so will I," and Fancy Frank threw the crowd unceremoniously aside, and took his stand by Iron Face and Ross Elliott, who stood with their backs to a breast-work, that had been hastily made by the emigrants during the night.

"Thank you, Powell, but I guess we will have no trouble," said Iron Face.

But he was mistaken, for Carter Grey was no man to take a blow quietly, and was now rising from the ground in a dazed kind of way, as though he did not know what had happened.

But catching sight of Iron Face he recalled the blow, and knife in hand sprung toward him, calling to his backers to follow.

But, as quick as a flash of light, Iron Face seized him in his arms, and, strong as was the young emigrant, hurled him upon his comrades with a force that again half-stunned him, and also sent several others to earth under the weight of his body.

Surprised at this wonderful exhibition of strength, the emigrants recoiled before Iron Face, just as two more forced their way through the crowd and ranged themselves as his supporters.

They were Skeleton Sam and Rattling Rifle, and the former cried:

"A family row, are it? Waal, I jist bet thet my twin an' me will be in ther muss, an' I calculates we'll side with you an' White Beaver, Cap'n Crimson."

"Thank you, my friends, but we must have no bloodshed among ourselves, for this train is in too much danger for its defenders to throw their lives away in the effort to harm this youth, for I shall kill the first man that lays a hand on him."

This cool assertion of Iron Face calmed the angry passions of many of the emigrants, who realized that he would keep his word, and also that the train was in danger from the Prairie Tigers and Black Kettle's band, and they in-

stantly fell back; but a few, the immediate friends of Carter Grey, held their ground, as if determined to cause trouble, and, seeing this, Fancy Frank stepped forward and said, sternly:

"I don't think you boys want trouble with me, but you shall have it if you don't stop this matter right here and at once; this gentleman is my guest, and my friend, and I will uphold him in his defense of young Elliott; you know me, boys, so push the matter if you wish."

"I have no quarrel with you, Powell, but that man struck me, and he shall answer for it," said Carter Grey, again coming forward.

"Better let well enough alone, Grey."

"No, I will not take a blow from any man."

"I am wholly at your service, sir, at any time," said Iron Face, coolly.

"Not now; but another time both you and that youth shall know that Carter Grey is a deadly foe."

"Threatened men live long, sir; come, Elliott, let us return to camp," and Iron Face, accompanied by the youth whose life he had saved and Fancy Frank, sought the quarters of Major Malcolm, where they found all excitement, as the scene at the other side of the motte had just been reported by Henry Maverick, and the major was about to hasten there when they arrived.

"I am sorry you have made a foe of Grey, Captain Crimson, as he is a dangerous man," said the major.

"I neither fear his enmity or desire his friendship, Major Malcolm; but I would ask that you keep an eye on young Elliott here, as I believe they mean him harm; what is it, White Beaver?" and Iron Face turned to Doctor Powell, who was attentively gazing out upon the prairie.

"I saw a bunch of feathers appear above that rise just now."

"Red feathers?"

"Yes."

"It is Red Snake, and he is reconnoitering before coming in; I will give him my signal," and raising the lower part of his mask he placed his hand to his mouth and gave a call that could be heard a mile away.

Instantly over the rise appeared an Indian, and following him was a bay horse, as faithful as a hound.

Throwing himself upon his back he came on rapidly toward the motte, and soon drew rein in the midst of the group.

"Well, the Red Snake did not go to the fort?" said Iron Face.

"No, chief; he saw the pale-face warriors encamped on the river, and their chief now comes to the aid of his people."

"The Red Snake has done well; let him seek food and rest."

"I will give him food, and Jack shall look after his horse, for they both seem tired," said Violet Vassar, and the Indian, with a thankful smile followed her, while the major asked:

"The soldiers are coming then, captain?"

"Yes, sir, and you have nothing more to fear, so I will say farewell as soon as they arrive," and there was a tone of sadness in the voice of Iron Face.

"Leave us? Why, I was in hopes that we were to keep you with us," answered the major.

"No, sir, I have duty calling me elsewhere—ah! there come the troopers now, and there are sufficient to protect you, so I will now say good-by," and he offered his hand, which the major grasped warmly, at the same time urging him to remain longer.

But Iron Face was firm, and touching his crimson sombrero to Mrs. Malcolm and Maud, he turned away to seek his horse, when his hand was grasped by Ross Elliott, who said, earnestly:

"One of these days we shall meet again, and I can thank you as your service to me deserves."

"I hope we shall meet again, but I deserve no thanks for doing my duty," and he turned to Fancy Frank, who just then came up, and said:

"Powell, I owe you a debt of gratitude you little dream of; but one day you shall know; tell Red Snake to join me at the rendezvous I appointed with him, please, and good-by."

The two splendid-looking men grasped hands a second, and springing into his saddle, Iron Face headed toward the prairie; but before he had gone far he drew rein, for in his path stood a form.

It was Violet Vassar, and she said softly:

"Why are you going?"

"Because duty calls me."

"I thought you were a free rover of the plains?"

"I am, but it is in discharge of a certain duty."

"Ah! and you were going without saying good-by to me?"

The man was silent an instant, and then said, softly:

"And would you have cared?"

"Do you ask that of one whom you have saved from worse than death, ay, and from death itself, only a few hours ago?" and Violet's tone was one of reproach.

"Forgive me, and farewell."

He held forth his hand, having drawn off his

gauntlet; but her eyes became suddenly fixed upon a large seal ring that he wore, and she cried out eagerly:

"Oh, where did you get that ring?"

Quickly the hand was withdrawn, and touching his hat, he said coldly:

"Miss Vassar, adieu."

As if understanding what his master wanted, Whirlwind started off at a rapid pace, just as Maud Malcolm came up, and said in a low tone:

"Vi, Carter Grey stands yonder, eying you as though he could kill you; but come, your Indian *protégé* has eaten everything he could lay his hands on, and wishes to see you before he goes; but what makes you look so blue?"

"Oh, nothing; I was only thinking."

"And so was I, and my thoughts were, why does that strange man wear a mask, and why does he suddenly ride away, as soon as he sees the troopers coming?"

"Neither question can I answer, Maud."

"Well, I hope he is not hiding a guilty face beneath his iron mask."

"Never! I feel that he never could, never will be a criminal, Maud," Violet answered, warmly; but suddenly changing her tone, she added lightly:

"But come, the troopers will soon be here, and we may find some handsome young officer to flirt with, for, like you, Maudie dear,

"I love the military,"

and the beautiful girl sang a few words of that popular ballad, in a rich soprano voice, that made a bird in a tree overhead stop his trilling to listen.

As they reached their own camp, the cavalry squadron dashed up, and Maud pointed to the young and certainly very handsome officer in command, and said gayly:

"Vi, there's your victim," and the two young girls ran into their tent to make themselves more presentable in the eyes of the gallants who wore the brass buttons, and had come to protect them from further danger at the hands of the red-skins and outlaws that had caused them all so much anxiety.

The coming of the troopers was greeted with hearty cheers, and dread took its flight from the hearts of the bold pioneers into the Western wilds, and around the camp-fires that night their dangers and hardships in the past were forgotten, and bright hopes filled every heart; but alas! what human eye can peer into the dim and misty future?

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RUINED STOCKADE.

THE ruined stockade, the rendezvous appointed by the Black Specter, where Fancy Frank was to meet her, was simply the ruins of what once had been a small fort, but one that had been deserted several years before, after the small force stationed there had one night been massacred, leaving but one to tell the story of that cruel scene.

And that one was Fancy Frank, at that time a surgeon in the United States army, and on duty in the stockade.

The night of the massacre he had volunteered to go for aid, as the provisions were getting low, the ammunition was growing scarce, and if help did not come soon, the besiegers must capture the gallant little command.

Several had attempted the daring deed of running the red gantlet, but their scalp-locks had been shaken tauntingly in the faces of their comrades the next morning, and all knew that their danger at the distant fort was not known.

But at last Fancy Frank had said he would go, and in spite of all urging not to do so, as certain death would follow, the brave surgeon was determined, and went to his quarters to prepare for his most hazardous undertaking.

After half an hour's absence he suddenly appeared before his comrades, causing them to spring to their feet in alarm, for they beheld before them a tall warrior, in full war-paint and feathers, and believed that the Sioux had gained entrance into the stockade.

But a quiet laugh and a word told them that Fancy Frank had simply used his Indian knowledge to metamorphose a pale-face into a red-skin warrior, and so thorough was the disguise that all thought it must certainly deceive the savages themselves.

With a grasp of the hand in farewell, he crept out of the stockade in the darkness, and those he left behind saw no more of him.

Like a serpent he wormed his way along to the nearest thicket, where warriors were passing to and fro, and rising from the ground he stalked boldly among them, here and there spoken to as one of their number, and replying promptly in such perfect Sioux, that not one doubted that there was a spy in their midst.

Seeking the corral where the ponies were kept, he selected one he believed the best fitted for a long and hard ride, and soon after he was scouring across the prairies at a sweeping gallop.

And within twenty-four hours he was back at the stockade, with a hundred gallant troopers at his back; but, alas! the dead, not the living

greeted them, for, only a short time before, the Indians had carried the place by storm, and none were left to tell the story of the hard-fought combat, and the desperate danger he had risked alone saved Fancy Frank.

And to this stockade did the guide wend his way, as soon as he had seen the Malcolm train, under the escort of the cavalry, well on its way toward the place where they were to settle.

He had spoken truly, when he told Wildbird he knew well the stockade, for bitter memories welled up at the name, and since that night of massacre he had not been there; but he did not hesitate now, for he feared no grim specters that superstitious trappers and hunters said made their home there, and should he meet foes of flesh and blood, he was fully able to cope with them.

The moon lighted his way, and it was nearly midnight when he entered the timber land, in which was the ruin.

Cautiously he approached until he stood within a hundred feet of the stockade, and his quick eye detected a slight glimmer, as from a fire-light, reflected against the surrounding trees.

Dismounting, he left the well-trained Ebony concealed in the brush, and cautiously approached on foot.

Suddenly, while crouching down, and slowly moving forward, his rifle ready, his hand touched something that caused him to start, and then to grasp it with a firm clutch, as though for a death-struggle.

But instantly he released his gripe, for his fingers were upon the throat of the dead.

Passing his hands over the prostrate form, he now saw that it was a white man, dressed in rough attire, still wearing his arms, and that a bullet-hole in his forehead had caused his death.

Not yet cold, he knew that but a short time had passed since there had been another tragedy in the timber around the old stockade.

But who was it that had taken the man's life and then left his arms?

That was the question that puzzled Fancy Frank, and he was most anxious to solve the mystery, for perhaps his coming might have frightened the slayer off, and even then he might be near, watching and waiting for him.

"It cannot be the woman; and yet why not?"

"She certainly did not hesitate the other night in firing upon those Indians; but this is a white man, and—ha! I forgot the glimmer of light in the stockade," and so saying the Scout went back the way he had come, treading as noiselessly as a panther, and making a *détour*, soon approached the ruin from the other side.

Throwing himself upon the ground, he crawled to the opening and cautiously glanced within.

A few of the cabins still remained, but some of them had been burned, and upon all rested a look of desolation and gloom.

Gazing searchingly about, he soon saw that from a crevice in one of the cabins came the glimmer of light that cast the dim reflection upon the tree-tops, which had caught his quick eye.

Approaching the cabin he glanced within, and what he saw there caused him to start suddenly, and drop his hand upon his revolver, as if for instant use.

And what he saw was enough to make the heart of a brave man quiver with emotion, for a woman was in dire peril of death, and the one who held her life in his hands was a man.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STARTLING DENOUEMENT.

FACE to face, the woman crouching down across the cabin, the man standing with his back against the door, and his revolver pointed at her heart, the two made a thrilling tableau for Fancy Frank to gaze upon, and the interest of which was increased, when in the one he beheld the beautiful face of the Black Specter, and in the other a person whom at a glance he did not recognize, as his clothing was blackened and charred, his face red and blistered, his hair and mustache crisp from contact with the fire, and his whole appearance indicative of one who had had a narrow escape from death by fire; but a long, earnest gaze, and the Scout saw in the man before him none other than Dick Harwood.

"What have I done to you, Dick Harwood, that you should wish to take my life?" asked the woman, in a low, trembling tone.

The man laughed bitterly, and answered:

"It is a joy for me to see you tremble from fear, my beauty, for you have sought rather than shunned death."

"And I would welcome it now, did I not have a duty to perform, for what have I to live for? I hate life, for my life is a curse, but I would not die now, no, not now, not now, and hence I plead for you to spare me."

"I will—upon conditions."

"Name them."

"You have thrown my love aside in the past—"

"You would have me be untrue to him I swore to love, honor and obey—"

"Bah! he is but an outlaw."

"He is my husband, and your chief, sir."

"And he keeps you here in deadly peril, when

I offered you a home far away, and to bury forever our secret of the past we had known."

"I would rather be true to him, outlaw though he be, than untrue to myself, as the companion of a saint."

"Oh, I do not plead with you any more, my virtuous Wildbird, for my love has undergone a change, and I love devotedly one whom I met in the emigrant train, and whom I have sworn to have."

"Spare her, I implore you, for look at me, and see what an evil man has made me, and do not drag down into the same abyss of crime one who is now innocent," and the woman clasped her hands imploringly, but again he laughed bitterly, and answered:

"She led me on, Wildbird, to believe she cared for me, and then scorned my love; ay, through her I nearly lost my life through that accursed mystery known as the Man of the Iron Face, who took her from me, and together they left me to die on the prairie, with a fearful fire behind me."

"Ay, they left me to my fate, and I gave up all hope; but the devil takes care of his own, my beauty, and I made my horse serve my purpose, for his carcass was my retreat until the flames swept over, but that for a minute I was in a hell on earth, let my appearance show," and he pointed to his scorched face and hands, and burnt clothing.

"It has certainly spoiled your beauty, Devil Dick, but has kindly given you a foretaste of what you may expect hereafter, if you do not repent you of your sins," was the not very sympathetic reply.

"To the devil with your preaching, woman; I had enough of that in the long ago, when my father was a clergyman, and I the organist of his church; well, you see what good it did me, for here I am, Devil Dick, lieutenant of the Prairie Tigers," he said, bitterly.

"Had you led a different life in that long ago, and—"

"Bah! what are you, woman?"

"Alas! what am I?" she moaned, sadly.

"A woman whose love was her ruin, and whose stubbornness will be her death, if she does not pledge herself to do as I wish."

"And what is it that you wish?"

"That you aid me to get the girl in that train, whom I now both love and hate, into my possession."

"Never! I will never be so base as that."

"And yet, not an hour ago, I saw you deliberately slay a man."

"It was because he was dogging my steps, set as a spy upon me by my husband; I had twice warned him back, but he followed me here, and when I threatened his life if he still pursued me, he drew his pistol and I acted in self-defense and killed him."

"I do not blame you; but when your hand is so ready to take life, I should think you would be willing to save your own by aiding me."

"Not as you wish."

"I feel that you are here to meet some one from the train, and you can easily help me if you will."

"But I will not."

"Wildbird, look at me; I am a desperate man, and I shall hesitate at nothing to gain my ends; you can join the emigrants and say that you have been a prisoner, and escaped from the Tigers, and they will protect you; watching your chance you can lead Violet Vassar—"

"Violet Vassar!"

"Yes; why does the name cause you to start—?"

"Oh, nothing; it brought up a name I had known in the past."

"Well, Violet Vassar is the woman I love and hate both, and unless you aid me, I swear to you that I will kill you."

"Do you forget that the Mad Colonel would avenge me?"

"Oh no; I would tell him that you discovered the man he sent on your trail, and attacking him, you both killed each other: that I was lying sick and suffering in the stockade, where I came after the fire, and that I saw, but could not prevent the affair, but, as soon as able, buried you both, and should he seek to find you, my story will be proven."

"And would you thus shoot down a woman?"

"Oh yes; you are not my friend, and the Colonel is beginning to see me through your eyes, so I would be glad to have you out of the way; if you aid me in this, I will marry the girl, and then go far from here, and lead a different life."

"You will never be different from what you are, for like the drunkard, having once tasted the intoxicating cup of crime, you will needs drain it to the very dregs."

"Then you refuse to aid me?"

"I do."

"I shall kill you, remember."

"Oh no, do not so cruel a wrong— Stay, hear me!"

"Well."

"Spare my life for twelve hours, and I swear I will come here and let you kill me, and I will kiss the hand that deprives me of life, for in the grave is rest."

She turned imploringly toward him, still crouching upon her knees, and with her hands stretched forth in earnest supplication.

But a cruel smile rested on his face, and he asked:

"Why not now, woman?"

"Because I have a duty to perform; if it were not for that, gladly would I tell you to kill."

"I cannot give you the delay, for I hate you, and I want you out of the way; so I shall shoot you now."

"Shoot me instead."

Both started at the strange voice, the woman with a cry upon her lips, the man with an oath, and their eyes turned to the back of the cabin, where, opposite to Devil Dick, was a window.

Now the wooden shutter was open, having been silently removed, and leaning upon his arms, and glancing into the room, was Fancy Frank, no weapon in his hand whatever, and a strange smile upon his handsome face, as he offered himself as a substitute for the pistol practice of the lieutenant of the Prairie Tigers.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WILDBIRD'S TRUMP CARD.

THOUGH taken by surprise, and utterly amazed at the indifferent air of the man who had like an apparition appeared before them, and whom he recognized, Devil Dick stood ready for action, and thrust his revolver forward, aimed with unflinching hand at the head of Fancy Frank, while he said in a hoarse tone:

"By Heaven! I will shoot you, Powell, if you move a muscle, for I've the drop on you."

"So it looks, Devil Dick; but why don't you blaze away, for if you don't I will," was the provokingly cool response, and the Black Specter expected to see the daring invitation of the Scout accepted, and she knew but too well the deadly aim of the outlaw officer.

But the slightest movement she made caught the quick eye of Devil Dick, and he cried out:

"Hold! Wildbird, you die, too, if you make a movement to aid him."

"Your pistol may hold the lady in subjection, Devil Dick, but I do not dread unloaded weapons," said Fancy Frank.

The dark and begrimed face of the outlaw changed color at this; but he said, harshly:

"Do you think I am a fool to carry an unloaded weapon?"

"Oh, no, I think you showed your sense in firing off your arms, and throwing away your cartridges, before the fire swept over you, knowing the powder would blow you to the devil; but I'll take the chances on that weapon being loaded," and with a light bound the Scout sprang through the window into the cabin, while the outlaw cried, earnestly:

"Back, Powell, or, by Heaven, I will kill you."

A mocking laugh was the reply of Fancy Frank, and he sprang forward toward his enemy as if to grapple with him.

But there came no flash, as Devil Dick had threatened, but instead the weapon was hurled at the head of the Scout, and skillfully dodged, while the next instant the two men confronted each other, knives in hand.

"Hold! as you surmised, I fired off my weapons, and threw away my ammunition, so am armed only with my knife," cried Devil Dick.

"I am not the man to take advantage, sir; here, madam, I intrust my arms to your keeping," and Fancy Frank unbuckled his belt and handed it to Wildbird.

Then he again faced his foe, and that each man was in deadly earnest there was no doubt, for each knew well the prowess of the other, and knowing Devil Dick now as the outlaw lieutenant of the Prairie Tigers, there was an old score to settle between the two, for Fancy Frank had been their bitterest enemy.

"Now, sir, are you ready?" said Fancy Frank, sternly, placing his knife on guard.

"I am ready, sir," was the answer of the smoke-begrimed outlaw.

"And I too am ready, for you are both my prisoners."

The two men were wholly taken aback at this, for suddenly a revolver muzzle looked into the face of each, and the Black Specter who held them knew well their use, and both the outlaw and Scout felt that she was in earnest.

Then followed an instant of silence, which was broken by Devil Dick, who asked, sternly:

"What means this interference, Wildbird?"

"It means, Devil Dick, that I return good for evil, and save your life."

"Save my life; how, may I ask?"

A derisive smile swept over the woman's face as she replied:

"You seem to forget that you are confronting a man who has but one equal on the plains; why, he would kill you in a second's time, and I do not wish you to die just now, for the colonel has need of you, so I set you free; but, remember, not one word in regard to meeting me here, or—"

"Do you threaten me, my beauty?"

"Yes."

"We shall see."

"I do not fear you; Hazel lies dead where I

shot him, and his arms will serve you, and his horse is in the thicket—go!"

"And leave you here to make love to this gallant Scout whose deeds you extol, and—"

"And what, Devil Dick?" she asked, in a hoarse voice.

"And lead him, with a squadron of soldiers, upon our retreat."

Instantly the muzzle of the revolver was thrust into his very face, while with blazing eyes and trembling voice the woman cried:

"Retract those words, Devil Dick, or I will kill you, so help me God!"

The man knew that she would keep her word, and said, quickly:

"I was severe on you, Wildbird, for I know you to be as true as steel."

"Enough! now go, but not one word to the Mad Colonel about meeting me here."

"And what must I say about the horse and arms of Hazel?"

"A man whose face has lie stamped on it, need not be at a loss for a falsehood for his tongue; but I am losing my patience—go!"

"Powell, we shall meet again, and when I am not—"

"So much like a singed cat as you now look; well, what were you going to say?" said Fancy Frank, in his indifferent way.

"Then we'll have our little affair out."

"Even so; if you are not a fast rider, I may overtake you."

"I'll see that you do not, sir," boldly said Wildbird, who still held Fancy Frank under the muzzle of the revolver in her right hand.

"Ah!"

It was all that Fancy Frank said, and as Wildbird's eyes again turned upon Devil Dick, he made a mock-polite bow, and went out of the door, which the woman closed behind him, while she said, in a low tone:

"Quick, sir! out of the window and see that he gets neither your horse or mine; but do not harm him, for I need him."

Fancy Frank had been undecided as to the course of the Black Specter, up to this moment; but now seeing that she was his friend, he quickly obeyed her, and glancing cautiously around the house saw Devil Dick leaning over the dead body of the outlaw Hazel, which the conversation of Wildbird proved she had killed.

Watching his opportunity, the Scout dodged into the timber, and soon saw his enemy mount a steed hid in the thicket and ride away.

But he had gone but a few steps, when he drew rein, and within a few feet of the spot where Fancy Frank was crouching, while he muttered:

"I have half a mind to go back, now that I have arms, and am mounted, and see this thing out."

A moment he remained in silent thought, and then, seeming to think better of it, he drove the spurs into the horse he had so opportunely gained possession of, and rode away at a rapid gallop.

As he started on his return to the cabin a sudden, loud shriek rung out on the air, and Fancy Frank well knew that it came from the lips of the Black Specter, and he sprang forward at full speed to solve the mystery of that piercing cry for help.

Arriving at the cabin he dashed the door open, and sprang within, his revolvers—which the woman had returned to him when he followed Devil Dick—ready in each hand for deadly work, should they be needed.

And needed the Scout's revolvers certainly were, for by the light of the fire, which Wildbird had kindled upon arriving at the cabin, Fancy Frank beheld three huge Dog Soldier Sioux, two of whom held the woman in their strong grasp, while the third turned to confront the intruder upon their little game.

"Napska!"

"White Beaver!"

"The White Medicine Chief!"

The three names, by which Fancy Frank was known to the Indians, broke almost simultaneously from their lips as they recognized the Scout.

But Fancy Frank gave them no time to resist, for his revolvers began a deadly rattle, and down went two of the number, while the third, releasing his captive, sprang upon the Scout, knife in hand, and instantly a fierce conflict began, but was quickly ended by Wildbird, who said, coolly:

"Let me end this."

As she spoke, a sharp report rung through the room, now thick with smoke, and the Dog Sioux fell dead in his tracks.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FANCY FRANK'S PLEDGE.

As the Indian fell under the bullet of Wildbird, White Beaver turned toward the woman, whose fatal aim he had a third time witnessed, and said coolly:

"You show little mercy for a woman."

"Ah, sir, the life I have led, the bitter past, has made me merciless; but I strike not cruelly, only when necessary, and these men I know and their object."

"Indeed! and what was their object?"

"I have had the misfortune to attract the ad-

miration of their chief, Black Kettle, and several times before he has endeavored to get me into his power, in spite of his professed friendship for the Mad Colonel.

"In coming here I was seen by his warriors, and these three were sent on my trail."

"Well, they have followed their last trail; but remain here while I scout around, for there may be more of them."

"No, these three are all; Black Kettle set five to watch me half a year ago, and take me prisoner, if it could be done without the Mad Colonel's knowing it."

"And the other two?"

"Are in the Happy Hunting Grounds," was the bitter reply.

"Ah!" and Powell gazed upon the woman with a strange look, which, observing, she continued:

"They dogged me, and I killed two of them; they dare not fire on me, and Ebony carried me out of danger; but how is my beautiful Ebony?"

"In splendid condition, and as faithful to me as a dog, as you will find, for I rode him here to return to you."

"Keep him as a present from me, he has but one superior and two equals on the plains, and one of these, Whalebone, I rode here, and the other belongs to an Indian I chased the day I met you."

"But I have no right to take your beautiful horse from you."

"You must, for your horse I rode to the Tigers' retreat, and he is in bad condition, so we will call it a fair exchange; now, tell me, did Devil Dick ride away?"

"He did, though after he mounted the outlaw's horse, and secured his arms, he seemed half-inclined to return and try conclusions with us."

"It is well he did not; I would have let you kill him awhile ago, only I want him to live for a purpose; now tell me if you are willing to keep the promise made me the other night?"

"I am."

"And the train?"

"Has gone on to the intended settlement, under the escort of Captain Loyd Carleton and his troop."

"Well, let them remain if so they like and settle here, excepting Major Malcolm and his family; they must return to their old home."

"If I understand the circumstances, the major has lost his old home, and all the wealth he possesses he has with him here."

"True, but fifteen thousand dollars will start him anew on a small farm, and it is better than remaining here; in fact he must not, shall not remain on this border."

"You speak strangely for one who does not possess the power to back your words."

"I have the power, White Beaver, Fancy Frank, or whatever men call you," she said, determinedly.

"And what is Major Malcolm to you?"

"Oh, do not ask me! only pledge me that you will do all in your power to urge his return; let him strike for the nearest railroad station, and then retrace his way to Louisiana."

"If he refuses?"

"He must not; see here!" she went to a door in one end of the cabin, and opening it, disclosed a small shed, in which stood a large, blood-red bay, built like a grayhound.

From the saddle-pocket she took a large envelope that had not been sealed.

This she opened, and by the firelight Powell discerned that it contained a number of new, crisp bills of the denomination of thousand and five hundred, and a letter which she read aloud.

It was dated New Orleans, some months back, and read:

"MAJOR BURT MALCOLM:

"SIR: Hereby I return you fifteen thousand dollars of 'conscience money,' which was won from you by fraud at the card-table.

"If it gives you a stepping-stone out of your present 'slough of despond' and misfortune, one who made you a victim will be more than content.

"Wishing you prosperity and happiness, I remain

"Yours,

CARD SHARP."

"This is a strange letter," said the Scout.

"Oh yes, and this is a strange world; but here is the money, and now see what an act of the Prairie Tigers allows me to do very cleverly."

As she spoke she displayed an express envelope, and turning it to the Scout's gaze he saw that it was addressed and marked as follows:

FORWARDING EXPRESS COMPANY, NEW ORLEANS.

To MAJOR BURT MALCOLM,

Care Commandante

FORT MORGAN,

ON SOUTH PLATTE,

Colorado.

\$15,000.00

"Well, what does all this mean?" asked the surprised White Beaver.

"It means that the Tigers tapped the line, called in the express packages, and that you were attacked by one Hazel, an outlaw whom you killed, and upon his person found this package, opened, as you see, and—"

"But I do not rob the dead, even if they are Tigers."

"No one would suspect you of it; but you

could look for papers upon him to discover anything of importance, for he might have been a messenger, you know."

"True; what then?"

"By falling into the honest hands of the White Medicine Chief, the package luckily reaches Major Malcolm."

"And what then?"

"You must urge that he leave this border."

"But if he will not return?"

"Then, for the love of Heaven, make him go to Texas, where, with this money, he can become a stock farmer; but here he must not remain."

"It is a splendid country for settlers, and many rancheros who started on a few thousand dollars are now hoof kings, as we call our big cattle men."

"But the Indians are troublesome here, and—"

"More settlers coming will soon run them out."

"But the Tigers will increase; for the more settlers the more wealth to them, and here the Malcolms must not remain."

"Then you fear the very band which, if border rumor says true, you are an officer of, more than you do Black Kettle's Soldier Sioux, and the other tribes?"

"Yes, for from the Indians the Malcolms have only the dread that other settlers have, while from the Mad Colonel they have far more; but I will say no more, and now I exact your pledge to do as I wish, and urge the major to leave, and—"

"Why do you pause?"

"Are you married?"

"I am not," and the Scout blushed.

"Are you in love?"

The Scout turned crimson at this direct attack upon the inmost secrets of his heart, and the woman seemed intuitively to read an answer, for, before he replied, she continued:

"Yes, I see that either Maud Malcolm or Violet Vassar has won your heart, and—"

"There are other young ladies in the train," he said, evasively.

"True, but they are not Mauds or Violets; one of these girls you love, and I hope, nay believe your love is returned, so go thou away from here with the Malcolms, if—"

"Again you pause."

"If you do not wish a fate worse than death to overtake her you love, and death to come upon you and Major Malcolm."

"I am not one to be driven by threats."

"I do not threaten; I merely supplicate."

"I have a duty to perform before I go."

"And that is—"

"To kill the Mad Colonel."

"Ha! why do you hate him?"

"A wrong done in the past; but we must part now."

"And I have your pledge to make the Malcolms leave?"

"Yes, if possible."

"In one week you will know their decision, so meet me at the Buffalo Spring, near the Buttes, if you do not fear to venture that near the supposed retreat of the Prairie Tigers."

"Ha! ha! ha! why, I know their retreat as well as you do, and once spent a day there; but the Mad Colonel was away, or—"

"Or what?"

"He would be coyote food now," was the almost savage answer.

The woman gave a slight shudder; but answered, quickly:

"Oh, he is hard to kill; but remember, one week from to-night."

"Now good-by, and accept my thanks for your goodness, White Beaver, and remember I owe you my life."

"As I owe you mine."

"We are still not quits, for I am yet in your debt; come, Whalebone."

The steed trotted out of the shed into the broad glare of the firelight, and leading him into the open air, and declining Fancy Frank's proffered aid, she sprang into the saddle and rode away, leaving the Scout alone with the dead and his thoughts.

A whistle brought Ebony to his side, and putting him in the shed the Scout rolled his blankets around him and, unmindful of the three Indians lying near him, and the wolves howling and snarling over the dead outlaw without, he sunk to sleep.

But a few moments after his eyes had closed in slumber one of the three Indians arose softly, and, knife in hand, began to creep toward the sleeping Scout.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE DEATH-SHOT.

THE Black Specter had not been half an hour gone from the cabin in the Rained Stockade, in which Fancy Frank slept peacefully, unmindful of the dead around him, or the bitter memories of the spot, when two horsemen rode up to the inclosure, coming from an opposite direction from the one that the woman had departed by.

Cautiously drawing rein they bent their ears

to listen for some sound, and the snarling of the wolves was heard, and knowing that where these prowlers were, human beings would not be near at hand, they rode boldly forward, and coming upon the worrying, fighting pack, caused an instant stampede.

Dismounting, one of the horsemen saw that the beasts were feasting off of a human being, and a closer glance showed it to be a white man.

Remaining on foot the man walked toward the row of cabins, his comrade and his horse slowly following.

From one to the other of these he went, his rifle in hand, until suddenly he started, for the glimmer of a light caught his eye.

The huts had been well built, but near the top of one of the walls Time had touched with decaying finger a heavy log, and through a crevice beamed a ray of light, that reflected upon the foliage of the trees in the background.

Motioning for his comrade to await him, the man crept cautiously nearer and nearer, and made a circuit of the cabin, at last coming to the side where a heavy window shutter, not tightly closed, left a space large enough for observation.

To this space the man put his eye, but quickly he withdrew it, his rifle took its place, and the flash and report followed, and then came a fall, a half-uttered shriek, a quick, firm tread, and the ringing words:

"Come on, you devils, white or red, you will find me at home."

"A nice way to welcome friends, Powell, when they save you from an Indian's knife," and with these words the man strode round to the door, which was instantly thrown open, and the hands of White Beaver and the Man of the Iron Face were clasped in warm greeting.

"Come in, old pard, and tell me about it; I left the reds for dead and dropped off to sleep, and awoke at your shot, and found a devilish Sioux falling heavily upon me."

"An Indian is never dead, Powell, until he is scalped; but I was scouting around, and came here to pass the remainder of the night, and catching a glimpse of your firelight looked in, and, thank God! just in time, as that red-skin was almost over you with his long knife."

"Again I owe you my life, Iron Face."

"Don't speak of it; but tell me, are you about to start a graveyard? for there's a white man outside, serving as a feast for coyotes, and these Indians make four ready for burial."

Fancy Frank wanted to make a clean breast of it, and tell why he had come; but he had promised not to betray Black Specter, and said:

"It does look that way; but I was on a scout, and found that fellow outside, and strange enough I discovered this package, which is addressed to Major Malcolm."

The Man of the Iron Face almost rudely seized the express package, and it being open read the letter and saw the contents, after which he said:

"This is strange indeed; a gambler return 'conscience money,' and the express being robbed, it fell to that rascal's share; I am more than glad you killed him, Powell, for the major's sake, for it may enable him to return East and start in business again, which I shall urge; but the Indians here?"

Fancy Frank wondered at the advice of Iron Face being the same as that of Wildbird, but made no comment about it, and replacing the package in his pocket, said, while his face flushed at claiming credit for what he did not deserve:

"Oh, they came in for a pow-wow, and were more than gratified; but my bullet must have glanced on that fellow's skull and only stunned him, and coming to, he had the cunning to remain quiet and turn the tables upon me, which he would have done had you not opportunely arrived; but you have some one with you outside?"

"Yes, Red Snake, the Pawnee chief, who has been my pard, since I rescued him, a year ago, from some of Black Kettle's band, and he's a noble fellow, Indian though he be."

"Well, call him in, and I guess Ebony will consent to share his shed with your horses, and I will be more than glad to have your and Red Snake's company, for there is no danger of our being disturbed again to-night, as men seldom come to this old stockade, and then only when led here by some strong motive."

"And yet to-night three white men and four Indians have come here," said Iron Face.

"True, and three of those Indians and one of those white men are dead; I tell you, Iron Face, this is a fatal spot, as I well know; but come, call in the Snake, and I have some edibles and a flask of the train commissary's best old rye."

A low call brought Red Snake into the cabin, and the two horses were soon unsaddled, and affiliating kindly with Ebony in the shed, while the two scouts and the Pawnee chief were partaking of their frugal supper before the fire, the iron mask still hiding all but the stern mouth and firm chin of the strange man, whom Fancy Frank gazed upon with almost mysterious awe.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE EMIGRANTS' ELDORADO.

At last at rest!

After long days, weeks and months of weary travel by day, and camping by night, the end of the tedious trail has come.

After hardships and dangers, hopes and fears, the haven is reached, and the emigrants are content.

Ay, content, though life is just opening to them in their new home, and before them lie weeks and months of toil to make their habitations comfortable to face the storms and winters of that far Western clime.

In a lovely and fertile valley they had settled, and their new home was called Eldorado City; but why city had been tacked on, none knew, excepting that it sounded better.

And the said "city" consisted of a blacksmith shop, a store, where nearly every necessity was kept, from a spool of thread to a jug of "tiger eye"; a school-house that served a double purpose, for it was to be used as a church on Sundays, and a huge shanty, that an enterprising ex-army-sutler had put up and called Social Hall, and where liquors were sold, cards were shuffled, and discussions held each night.

One week had the emigrants been in Eldorado City, and the town was built, and promised not only to prosper, but to annihilate Canyon City, that was two miles further up the valley, and the "post" of the fort, which was situated upon the river.

The site of Canyon City was at once decided to be not well chosen, and with nearly two hundred emigrants settling in the valley below, and more expected, the couple of saloon and store-keepers, with the score or more of herders, trappers, hunters and idlers, living in the shanties there, determined to remove to Eldorado City, and as to determine was to do, the reader may understand that our settlers almost immediately had an addition to their town.

Stretching away to the north and west of the settlement were high hills, and to the south and east were rolling prairies, here and there broken by divides and canyons, and scattered here and there through the valleys were the squatters' homes, rapidly going on toward completion.

With the fort and its hangers-on not far away, the increased population of Canyon City, and the coming in at night of the tired settlers, at least the male portion, for chats over prospects and what had been done, it may be surmised that Eldorado City became a stirring place after sunset, ere one week had gone by after its springing into existence.

Over this medley of humanity Major Malcolm was unanimously looked upon as a kind of leader, or chief, for there was that about him that commanded respect and regard, and his lovely, refined family seemed to be held as pure gold among rough nuggets, and all felt for them a sympathy that some deep misfortune should have driven them to those far-away wilds.

With the aid of the half-dozen negroes, who had been content to follow their master into the wilderness, the major's house progressed rapidly, for there were two other pairs of willing hands to help, as the day after the coming of the train, Iron Face and Fancy Frank arrived, and set to work with a will.

And, not to be outdone, Captain Loyd Carleton came over with his troop, and set the soldiers to work, stating that he was yet fearful of a dash into the settlement of Black Kettle's band or the Mad Colonel, and he wished to have his men in hand.

The settlers thought the handsome young captain had another motive, in the bright eyes of Maud Malcolm; but they did not say so, although they had not forgotten how devoted the officer had been on the march from Dead Man's Motte to the valley.

And thus the first week passed away in busy work, and the time was up for the meeting of Fancy Frank and the Black Specter as agreed upon.

But the Scout had not forgotten his promise, for he had ridden out of Eldorado City one evening alone, and declining the company of Iron Face, had evidently gone on some expedition which he did not desire known.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MAD COLONEL'S PLOT.

In the rugged hills, from whose summits a vast expanse of valley, rolling lands, and, far beyond, prairies can be seen, with rivers winding their clear way along, was the retreat of the Prairie Tigers.

It was said that no one, excepting an oath-bound member of the cruel band, knew their exact retreat, and yet Fancy Frank had told the Black Specter that he had been there, and man of truer word dwelt not on the plains, or elsewhere.

Certainly was it said of those unfortunates who fell prisoners to the Tigers, and were taken to their stronghold, as in Dante's *Inferno*:

"He who enters here
Leaves hope behind,"

for were the victim a woman, sad indeed was her fate, and if a man he would surely be condemned to an almost living death, if not to death itself, did he not take the fearful oath that bound the wild band together under the leadership of the Mad Colonel.

To this place I would have the reader accompany me to see and not be seen.

A deep canyon penetrates far back into a rugged mountain, a mere chasm as it were, showing where the towering earthen mass had been rent in twain.

Through this chasm the path led to the inner recess, and at its ingress stood a mounted guard, that could communicate with those a mile in his rear, to warn them of danger, by pulling a telegraph wire, that was ingeniously arranged to fire off half a dozen muskets as a volley.

When this alarm was given it brought the savage denizens of the inner recesses of the mountain to the pass, where a dozen men could hold at bay a hundred, until sharpshooters could perch themselves upon the heights above, and then woe betide the attacking force in the chasm below.

Once through this pass and a succession of vales were seen, forming a chain of miniature valleys that led back into the higher hills beyond, but which were broken by a rushing river, which securely guarded approach from that quarter.

In these valleys, extending not more than half a mile, dwelt the Prairie Tigers, and it was no wonder that the Mad Colonel felt secure, with nearly four-score desperate men to follow his daring lead, and if driven hard by soldiers or Indians to retreat to this almost impregnable stronghold, where nothing less than a brigade would dare follow him.

And from this mountain fastness the Mad Colonel had made his descents upon the emigrant trains, settlers, stage-lines, and even army posts for several years, holding his desperate crew together with an iron rule and courage worthy of an honest cause.

'Twas talked of in the forts, the settlements, and around the lonely camp-fires, that he was an ex-army officer, whose wild life had run him into debt, until in desperation he had discarded his uniform one night, and with a few fellow-spirits had attacked and robbed the relief-train of the paymaster's funds to pay off the troops.

Whether suspected or not, he soon after was dismissed the service, and the next known of him by those who watched his career, was as a solitary road-agent, who lay in wait for stages over the Overland, and desperately made the passengers "stand and deliver."

Dressed in the uniform of a colonel of cavalry, and never having any one to aid him, he was soon known as the Mad Colonel; but, there seemed method in his madness, for, when guards went with the stages, he disappeared for awhile, to eventually turn up at the head of the band of Prairie Tigers, who were too strong to fear anything that the border could bring against them.

With a price on his head, the Mad Colonel seemed not at all worried one pleasant afternoon, the one prior to the departure of Fancy Frank alone from Eldorado City, as he reclined in a hammock in front of his neat log cabin, idly smoking a cigar, and watching the rings of gray smoke float up and disappear in the ether.

It is true that the loss of the emigrant train had been a sore disappointment to him, for his force and Black Kettle's combined had not been sufficient to dare an attack on the soldier-guarded train, and Skeleton Sam and Rattling Rifle, who had acted as guides, by the direction of Fancy Frank, had been too well versed in border strategy to permit them to be entrapped by Indian cunning.

Therefore, he had been compelled to let it slip through his greedy fingers, and was really not so worried on that account, as he did not wish to share the booty with old Black Kettle, and not to do so would have caused war to the hilt, between the Dog Soldier Sioux and the Tigers, he well knew.

"Another time, men, for these settlers have come to stay," he said to his band, and to Black Kettle:

"Chief, it would be madness, now; return to your hunting-grounds with your braves, and I will watch for an unguarded moment, and then send a scout for you."

The Tigers were content to follow the commands of their leader, and Black Kettle quietly acquiesced in the advice given him, but in his cunning heart he determined, when the time came, to bring a force with him that would be able to secure the "lion's share" of the plunder, and, at the same time secure for himself a prize he had long coveted, which was none other than the beautiful Black Specter, whom he had vowed by the Great Spirit should become the queen of his wigwam.

So, back to his hunting-grounds went the wily old chief, and up to his stronghold marched the Mad Colonel, and a season of rest had come; a calm, as it were, before the storm of the Prairie Tigers' wrath, that they intended should soon break upon the settlement.

And, as he lay there, that balmy afternoon,

puffing his fragrant cigar, he was plotting and planning, though his calm, handsome face showed no sign of the cunning and cruel heart within.

Presently he called out:

"Wildbird!"

"I am here," and out of the cabin came the woman already so well known to the reader, but her black riding-habit had been exchanged for a buckskin suit that became her well, while a light gray hat, encircled by a gold cord, was jauntily perched upon her head.

"Have you heard how Dick was this morning?" asked the chief.

"Yes, his servant said he was still feeling the effects of the prairie fire, and the hardships he endured after it," answered the woman.

"It is strange how he should have found Hazel dead, for who could have killed and not robbed him of either his horse or arms?" said the Mad Colonel, suspiciously.

"As Devil Dick found him, you should ask him, not me," was the calm reply.

"I did, and he says he found him in the timber near the ruined stockade; I regret Hazel's death as I sent him on an important mission."

"Did he accomplish it?" innocently asked the woman, showing no emotion.

"Dead lips speak not, so how am I to know what he discovered?" and the Mad Colonel looked fixedly into the face of the woman, but not the quiver of a muscle or the faintest blush was visible, to show that her lips could make known the secret.

"Well, I am convinced of one thing and that is we have a traitor in our band."

"Why do you think so, chief?"

"Hazel's death, the two Indians being killed who guarded that daring scout White Beaver; and then old Kettle has sent me word that three of his best warriors, sent on secret duty, were found dead at the ruined stockade."

"It does look strange who could have killed them; perhaps it was White Beaver, or it might have been the man they call Captain Crimson."

"It might have been, but I doubt it; but there are three mysteries I wish to solve, and I will."

"And they are—"

"First, why is it that this man, D. F. Powell by name, a surgeon in the army some years ago, should suddenly league himself with Indians, become their medicine chief, and now be roaming the prairies over as a hunter and a guide, when he has ample means to live in comfort?"

"You are doing the same."

"True, but crime has driven me to become an outlaw, and no one can say that White Beaver, as the reds call him, has ever done a wrong; his face is too noble; no, he has some purpose."

"I can tell you what it is," said the woman, in a low tone.

"Ha! how know you?" and the Mad Colonel half sprung from his hammock.

"From his own lips."

"By Heaven! this is becoming interesting; go on! but where in the devil's name did you meet him?" and the Mad Colonel gazed suspiciously at the woman, who answered evasively.

"You forget that Ebony was run down, that night we were encamped near Dead Man's Motte, by the Man of the Iron Face, and that when he took me prisoner Fancy Frank came up, pursued by Tigers and Dog Sioux?"

"Ah, yes, I remember, and they took your horse and gave you Fancy Frank's, at the same time setting you free; I had forgotten," and the chief laid back in his hammock once more.

"Well, now tell me his purpose?"

"To kill you!"

"He is not alone in his desire, my dear," and not a shadow crossed the face of the chief; but after a moment of silence he asked:

"Why does he seek my life?"

"For a wrong done him in the past."

"Ah! I have done so many wrongs in the long ago, I fail to recall just now how I have sinned against him; but of all those I have injured, my dear, you are the most forgiving, for you I certainly brought a bitter blight upon; but you I loved, Wildbird, and still love."

"And I loved you, or never would I have shared your evil fortunes as I have, and, oh, God! what have I not become!" and she buried her face in her hands, while he said pityingly:

"You have suffered, Wildbird; but bear up a while longer and I will have gained enough to enable us to seek a foreign land and live in peace and comfort."

"Comfort, yes, but in peace never, with the specters of your evil deeds, ay, and my life also, rising grimly before us."

"No, no, we will bury our past in the grave of forgetfulness."

"Never! there are ghostly memories that will not remain buried; but tell me, chief, what is your intention regarding—the Malcolms?" she asked, suddenly.

"I have not made up my mind," he answered, indifferently.

"Not made up your mind; then you mean them harm?"

"Oh, no; I am sorry they came West, for they are a thorn in my side; by Heaven! how beautiful Maud Malcolm and Violet Vassar have become."

"You have seen them, then?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes; I lay in ambush as the train passed through Red Canyon, and they sat on their horses, waiting for others to come up, within fifteen feet of me; by the way, as Devil Dick is ill, or pretends to be, I will get you to go on a duty for me."

"Well, what is it?"

"It will be a long ride."

"I care not, nor do I fear."

"True, you are just the pluckiest woman I ever saw, and candidly, Wildbird, I stand in awe of you when you are angry."

"You have cause, for I swear to you, that did I believe you meant wrong to those I love, or would deceive me, I would kill you as I would a viper in my path."

The piercing eyes of the man dropped before her blazing look; but he said, quietly:

"You are silly to think I mean them wrong; have I not wronged them enough already? But now tell Angel Dave to come here."

The woman silently departed, and clasping his hands over his eyes the chief mused in silence until a voice suddenly said:

"I'm here, Cul."

"Ah, Angel, you move so like the saintly being for whom you are named I never heard you approach," and the chief turned toward Angel Dave, who had won the strange cognomen from being the very opposite, as his was not a saintly nature, and his cadaverous face was marked with cunning and cruelty that did not belie him.

A man of powerful build, he was yet leonine in his movements, and not even the Mad Colonel cared to offend him, or would like to risk a hand-to-hand conflict with him.

"I allus moves light, Cul; no need o' advertisin' yerself," was the response, in an insolent tone.

"True; where is Wildbird?"

"I left her lookin' arter some o' ther gang who are a leetle off in health."

"Very well; now I want you to take your best horse and go to Black Kettle's camp."

"I'm yer honey, Cul."

"Tell him that the Black Specter comes to him to-morrow, or next day, with a message from me, and that if he wants her he can have her."

"Lordy, Cul, is yer goin' back on that leetle 'ooman?"

"I do as I please, Angel Dave, without questioning; Wildbird has not been pleasing me lately, and I'll get rid of her to Black Kettle; did you or any of the band displease me, as you know, I would use my knife."

"Yas, you're right handy with yer knife, Cul; but, Lordy, the leetle gal is such a sweet 'un, an' she's so good to ther boys."

"I'll find one to suit my fancy better."

"Aho! waal, when a man gits tired o' his squaw, 'tain't no use argufying the case, so I'll go."

"And when you return, telling me that she is Black Kettle's captive, for you must remain in his camp until she arrives, I will give you a bag of gold."

"Done; I'd make it lively for my old grandmother for ducks; I'll go to once, Cul."

"Do so— Ah! there comes Wildbird."

The diabolical hireling of a worse master walked away, just as Wildbird approached, and said:

"I was detained, looking after several who are sick in camp."

"And Harwood?"

"Is better; he was sitting in front of his cabin, but his hands and face are yet scarred by the fire; I can tell you he made a narrow escape from death."

"It will harden him for the toast Satan will one day give him."

"I know others that will be at the devil's barbecue," was the bitter reply of the woman; but the chief laughed, and answered:

"Well, we'll not discuss that warm subject; but be in readiness to start with the dawn for Black Kettle's camp, and tell him under no circumstances to move against the settlement until he hears from me, for, if we give them a few weeks' rest, they will grow careless, and then we will have all our own way."

"Have you sent that devil's angel ahead to spy my movements?"

"Ha! Wildbird, what mean you?"

"I may be wrong; but if you are playing a game against me, beware," and the woman walked into the cabin, muttering:

"Well, I doubt him more and more; but my visit to Black Kettle will enable me to keep my engagement with Fancy Frank; but if I catch sight of Angel Dave watching me, I will kill him as I did Hazel."

And the Mad Colonel muttered:

"I am growing suspicious of the woman, and I hope I am not too late to prevent her betraying me, or telling Malcolm all, and thereby thwarting my plans regarding Maud, whose beautiful face I cannot banish from my heart; but it's a toss-up whether Violet is not as beautiful."

"Well, I shall bide my time," and drawing his sombrero over his eyes the Mad Colonel

sunk to sleep as quietly as though there were not grim phantoms haunting his evil life and beckoning him on to ruin.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE TOILS.

THOUGH the day had been so balmy and calm, toward evening a violent storm blew up, and Angel Dave, who had not gone far beyond the mouth of the pass, was compelled to seek refuge for himself and horse in a secluded canyon.

Tired out from excessive poker-playing the past several nights, and finding a dry and safe retreat, the man dropped quickly off into a deep slumber, undisturbed by the howling of the storm above and around his place of shelter.

When he awoke it was dark, and the storm still raging he turned over for another sleep, and did not awake until the morning sun penetrated his retreat and fell upon his face.

His horse had been feeding since dawn on the rich grass on the canyon's sides, and Angel Dave hastily prepared his breakfast, and then saddling his faithful animal, mounted and set forth upon his errand.

The trail was badly washed, and many trees had been blown down, so that he had to pick his way, and it was slow traveling until he came to the valley, and there he determined to make up for lost time, so dismounted to give his horse a rest, and tighten his saddle girths.

Unfortunately for Angel Dave he stopped within thirty feet of a dense thicket, and while drawing on the strap of his hair girth failed to see a dark object suddenly shoot forward, and then with a sharp whirr, settle down over his neck, while he was jerked backward with a force that laid him prostrate upon the earth, half-stunned and strangled.

Ere he could put his hands up to unloosen the cruel lariat around his throat, a tall form bounded out of the thicket, and bending over placed a revolver to the head of the Tiger, while a stern voice said:

"You are my prisoner, my sweet Angel."

"Hello! you is Fancy Frank?" cried Angel Dave, in a half-choked voice.

"So men call me."

"And White Beaver?"

"Yes."

"And the White Medicine Chief?"

"The Winnebagoes call me so."

"And Napska?"

"True."

"And Doctor Powell, former pill sharp and bone-cutter o' ther army?"

"You know me well."

"I does, and yer is ther last man on 'arth I'd like ter meet when I is down an' you is up."

"Oh, it's a mere game of life's see saw; you had me down once, when you were bought to assassinate me."

"Yas, but yer didn't stay down."

"There is where you and I differ; you will."

"Lordy! does yer mean I is a goner?"

"Yes."

"Goin' ter call on me ter hand in my chips?"

"Yes."

"Tain't a squar' deal, Pills, for you holds all ther trumps."

"As you did, when you shot me from ambush, and then robbed me."

"Yer should study Scriptur' an' l'arn ter be fergivin', as ther Gospil Sharp ust ter tell us, when you an' me was honest fellers at ther fort."

"You mean rascal, you were born dishonest; but I'll not argue that with you, but ask you some questions as soon as I have clipped your Tiger claws," and still keeping the lariat around the prisoner's neck, and the revolver at his head, for Fancy Frank well knew the man's great strength, he took his arms from his belt, and then securely bound him, so that escape was impossible.

Then he caught the Tiger's steed, which was quietly feeding near by, and hitching him in the thicket, returned and carried his prisoner there.

"You is as tender of me as if I were a young babby, pard."

"Yes, I don't wish to hurt you until I kill you."

"It hain't in yer ter kill me in cold blood, though I knows yer ter be hell on wheels when yer gits yer mad up."

"We shall see; now, Angel Dave, where is your chief?"

"Back in the lay-out."

"With his entire hand?"

"Ceptin' me."

"Where are you going, or rather were you going?"

"Scoutin'."

"To the Eldorado City settlement?"

"Guess not."

"Where?"

"Jist nosin' round like."

"Very well, your nosin' round like has run your neck in danger; but I shall soon know all about you; now I will secure you so that you will await my return," and Fancy Frank made the bonds tighter, and then mounting Ebony started to ride away, when Angel Dave called out:

"You has ther Black Specter's horse, pard?"

"Yes; was she in camp when you left?"

"She were; would yer like ter take her prisoner, too?"

"How could I?"

"I happens ter know she's goin' off on a leetle racket, an' ef yer lets me go, I'll tell yer whar yer kin find her."

"I may get both."

"Guess not; she are a screamer to sarcum-vent; come, doctor, let me go, for I hain't no good, an' capter ther gal, for she's a terror on wheels."

"And you will betray her if I let you go?"

"Fact! I'll tell yer jist whar you kin light down upon her."

"Wait until I return," and Fancy Frank rode away.

But scarcely had he been gone half an hour when Angel Dave, hearing hoof-falls, turned as well as he could, and looking around beheld the Black Specter gazing upon him, a revolver in her hand.

"Waal, this are prime," he said, quickly.

"You seem in a bad way, Angel Dave."

"I isn't happy, ma'am; but I is glad yer has come, for we kin together make a rich haul."

"Ah! what mean you?"

"I is a prisoner, as you see."

"Yes, and how is it that the famous Angel Dave has been caught and bound?"

"I got took in with a lariat, an' a shootin'-iron kept me from bein' playful while I was bein' bound."

"And who did this?"

"A man who is most 'commodatin' in answerin' ter naties, fer ther Injuns calls him White Beaver, Med—"

"Hal Fancy Frank?"

"That is another o' his handles."

"Where is he?"

"Gone over ther hill, but what fer, I dunno; perhaps ter find a tree big enough ter hang me on."

"I don't doubt it; I will strike his trail."

"Don't do it by yersef, or he'll sing psalms at your funeral, too; but jist unhitch me, an' we'll lay low for him, an' when he returns we'll bag him."

"Do you expect me to release you, when I know you are now under the orders of the Mad Colonel to dog my steps?"

"You is off ther trail; I wasn't told ter foller you."

"You were sent on some business in which I am concerned, and now you expect me to aid you."

"You is good at guessin', ma'am; I was goin' on a leetle biz thet wa'n't jist right, seein' as how when I was awful sick you tuk car' o' me as ef I'd 'a' bin yer brother; but I hasn't forgot it."

"So I see, when you were going to do me some harm."

"I didn't want ter do it; but then I has lost all my honest earnin's playin' poker, an' ther Colonel was ter stake me ag'in."

"Hal then he has planned some deviltry against me; listen, Angel Dave, tell me if you wish to save your life, for if you do not tell me, I'll stop his plot by ending your life."

There was something in Wildbird's face that told the man she would keep her word, and he said, doggedly:

"Waal, what does yer want me ter tell yer?"

"First, where were you going?"

"Ter Black Kittle's camp."

The woman started, and her face paled; but she quietly asked:

"Why?"

"Ter see the ole devil."

"That I know; be more explicit, or I may become cruel."

"Ther Cul sent him a message."

"What was it?"

"It'll make yer hot ter know."

"Tell me!" was the imperious command.

"Lordy! but you'll howl when yer knows."

"Tell me!"

"Better let me loose fust, so I kin skip when yer gits hot."

Her answer was to draw a revolver from her belt, and the action spoke louder than words, when Angel Dave saw the expression on her face, for he said quickly:

"You'll set me free when I tell yer?"

"Yes."

"Waal, leetle 'ooman, ther Cul has gotted tired o' seein' you around, an' I guesses he's got his eye sot on another gal, fer he tole me ter tell ole Kittle thet you was a-comin' with a message, an' ef he wanted yer fer a squaw, he'd better—"

The man paused, even his evil heart touched, at the woman's face, as livid and quivering it looked down upon him, while, her limbs refusing to hold up her weight, she sunk on the ground beside him in a deep swoon.

"Oh Lordy! I hes played hell on my watch; she fainted, an' me tied, an' thet Scout will soon be tearin' in here like a bound arter a skunk; oh, I does feel strange."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

To picture the despair of Angel Dave would

be impossible, as he lay there bound and utterly helpless, gazing with staring eyes upon the white face of the unconscious woman, whom he could not aid, while each moment he expected the return of Fancy Frank, into whose clutches he looked for the Black Specter also to fall.

"I'm durned ef I don't believe she's kicked; passed in her chips, or is goin' ter; jist ter think how hard it hit her, fer ther Cul ter treat her bad; an' she didn't deserve it, fer she's been a angel in our camp, an' is too good fer ther chief, or I are a chronic liar; waal, I guesses I'se gittin' tender-footed in my heart, now I is expectin' my checks ter be called in; I certainly is narvous, an' ef thet Fancy Frank comes up an' fetches his pard Iron Face with him, then I shell straddle a prayer an' pass; oh Lordy! she's a-kickin'."

As he spoke Wildbird moved, and then her eyes opened and she gazed into the prisoner's face.

Instantly his words came back to her, and struggling upon her knees she cried earnestly:

"Did you speak the truth, Dave? Did he intend to betray me into the hands of that savage chief?"

"I are a howlin' liar ef he didn't."

"Oh God! that he should have added this crime to his black list; but no, it shall not break my heart; no, no, it will make me strong to right this wrong; it will make me a very Nemesis, without mercy, and loving hatred."

"The Cul is in fer a hell o' a time, I guesses," muttered Angel Dave.

Springing to her feet she paced to and fro like an enraged tigress, until a word of Angel Dave recalled her to herself.

"I is expectin' a wisiter, an' I doesn't wish ter be in harness when he comes."

"True; I will keep my promise."

"An' we'll jist take in ther White Beaver; then we'll make up some lie to tell ther-Cul, fer I will hev to go on to Kittle's camp, but you needn't, an' yer mustn't peach on me."

"No; but do you promise not to fire on the Scout—to take him alive?"

"Guesses I kin, fer I'll hev ther drop on him."

"Then I release you; now we'll await his coming, but remember, do not fire on him," and she severed the bonds that bound the huge villain.

"Come, we hes but a leetle time, fer I hears him a-comin'," cried Angel Dave, and the two crouched down in the bushes, the woman behind the man, who held his rifle ready, for Fancy Frank had left it by his side.

Unconscious of the change that had taken place Fancy Frank rode up to the thicket, and suddenly he drew rein, when Angel Dave called out sternly:

"Paws up, pard! I holds trumps now."

Taken unawares, Fancy Frank knew it would be death then to attempt to fly, or draw a weapon, but his quick eye was ready to take the slightest advantage, as he said coolly:

"You've got the drop on me, certain, and hold a full hand."

"No, I hold trumps; make a move, Angel Dave, and you die."

The last speaker was the Black Specter, who had risen behind Angel Dave, and suddenly pressed her revolver against his head.

"Lordy! scratched by a cat, fer sartin," groaned the Tiger, while Fancy Frank broke out in a ringing laugh.

"Drop your rifle, Dave!"

He obeyed the woman's order without a word.

"Now, sir, come and bind him," she said, to Fancy Frank, who dismounted, and with his revolver covering Angel Dave, approached.

"Pards in sin, or I are a liar," growled the Tiger.

"Dave, I promised to set you free, if you told me of the chief's treachery, and I kept my word; you are this gentleman's prisoner, and it remains with him to say what is to be done with you, and I certainly am willing to ask mercy for you," said the woman, as Fancy Frank approached and again bound the Tiger securely, while in a few words Wildbird told him of what had occurred.

"Well, I am half-inclined to treat with Angel Dave, in spite of the devil stamped on his face, and that I know is in his heart," said Fancy Frank.

"I are gittin' tender-footed now, pard."

"We shall see; if you are willing to tell me what I would know, and which you can tell, I will spare your life; if not, I will kill you."

"I'm a boss talker, pard, when thar is business in it."

"That I shall see; now let me see you for a moment," and Fancy Frank addressed Wildbird, who silently followed him to a spot out of earshot of the prisoner.

"I am here as I promised," he said, calmly.

"True, and I thank you; what is the result?" she asked, anxiously.

"The major took the package, and could not remember who could have sent it, among the many who won his money; but all urging that I could do, would not change him in his determination to remain here, for he said he would build him a comfortable home, and organize a

company of men, who, with the soldiers, would soon rid this part of the country of the Mad Colonel and the hostile band of Indians."

"You did all in your power to get him to return to Louisiana?"

"Yes, or to Texas; but he said he would invest his money in cattle, and in a few years, when he became a cattle king, would return and purchase his old home, where he hopes to be buried among his ancestors."

The woman was silent for a moment, and then said, as if thinking aloud:

"Perhaps it is as well now, for with their chief out of the way the Tigers will quickly disband, as Devil Dick can never hold them together, and the settlers can easily keep off the red-skins; yes, it is perhaps best as it is, for there is a fortune in the cattle business out here, and he deserves to make money to repay him for what he has lost; now I will return and woe be to thee, my gallant colonel."

Almost forgetting Fancy Frank in the thoughts that flashed through her mind, she turned to go, when the Scout asked:

"Have you any wish regarding Angel Dave?"

"None; and yes, I would not have you kill him, for he told me that which I would know."

"I have questions of import to ask him too."

"Ha! I remember you said at the ruined stockade that your duty on these plains was to kill the Mad Colonel; how has he wronged you?"

"You would know?"

"Yes."

"Come and you shall hear all," and Fancy Frank led the way back to where Angel Dave lay bound, watching with eager interest the two persons, who he knew held his life in their hands.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BLACK SPECTER'S PLOT.

"WELL, sir, I have a few questions to ask you, and remember I expect you to tell the truth."

"I'll do it if my tongue will wag truthful, pard, but it's got kinder nat'ral like fer it ter lie."

"I'll keep this persuader in your eye; now, answer me; you were born in the State of New York?"

"Gospil, pard."

"In your native village dwelt a man who was your schoolmate, and one day saved you from drowning?"

"Gospil ag'in; he were therson o' a rich man, an' his name were—"

"Never mind the name; he went into the army?"

"Sure."

"You committed a crime which caused you to fly for your life?"

"You has it down like readin', pard."

"In the South-west you again met your old schoolmate, and entered his company as a soldier?"

"Fact."

"You aided him in robbing the paymaster's train, disguised as road-agents?"

"Talk it off, pard, for you knows."

"After he left the army he returned home, and soon after joined you on his ranch, and he brought a young girl with him?"

"He did; she was a pretty little gal, the daughter o' ther parson in our village, an' she was dead gone on him."

"Did he marry her?"

"He promised to, but he didn't keep his word."

"And where is she?"

"With ther angels, I guesses."

"She died, then?"

Angel Dave hesitated, and, seeing it, Fancy Frank said, sternly:

"Tell me!"

"I guesses she'd 'a' lived longer ef it hadn't been fer—"

"For what, sir?" and the face of Fancy Frank was very white.

"Pizen."

"Poison! did he poison her?"

"He giv her some Injun mixture, an' she passed in."

"You know this?"

"I buried her."

The Scout was silent a moment, and then he said:

"Do you remember ever seeing me in the past?"

"I ust ter see yer at the fort, where yer was a pill sharp."

"Not before?"

"Yer does has a familiar look, but I hain't able ter place yer."

"Then why did you attempt to kill me once?"

"To git yer duckits," was the bold answer.

"Then you were not hired?"

"Nary, pard; you were a fancy dresser, wore a gold timer an' lariat ter hang it to, an' ust ter carry duckits in quantity in yer pockets, so I thought I'd struck a good lead, and drewed on yer."

"And I nearly died from the wound you gave me; but, do you not remember an old schoolmate at the village academy, by the name of Frank Powell?"

"Lordy! I has yer down now in my mem'ry chist; put it thar, pard, I'm glad ter see yer ag'in," and the man made an effort to extend his bound hand, while Fancy Frank gazed sternly upon him, and Wildbird stood silently by.

"No, I will not take your hand; not because you attempted my life, Dave Titus, but because you allowed poor Bessie Ray to be lured from her home and parents by a villain, who took her life when he became tired of her."

"Yer see, pard, she was goin' ter let her tongue slip on him, soon as she found out he was a—well, it's a hard word, but I'm not preachin' a funeral sarmon, so I'll say it—horse-thief, an' he were a leetle worse, too."

"To save himself, he killed poor Bessie?"

"You is talkin', pard."

"And you aided him?"

"Nary, for in lookin' at her the old Mohawk river rose before my eyes, with the village on its banks, the ivy-grown church on the hill, where was sleeping my poor old mother, whose heart I broke by my evil life; yes, Bessie brought back all those memories, Frank Powell, and I would not have harmed her for the gold of California."

The outlaw had suddenly dropped all border dialect, and his breast heaved, and tears stood in his eyes, showing that he still had a heart.

Instantly Fancy Frank severed the bonds that held him, and said with some emotion:

"I will take your hand, Dave Titus, for I see that you are not wholly bad, and it was you that placed her in her last resting-place."

"Yes, I buried her, and I have often had the spot rise before me in my dreams; it was cruel of him to betray her and then kill her, Frank."

"He shall not escape my vengeance for the deed, Dave Titus, for I loved that girl with all my heart; and after he left she confessed her love for me, as it was only a fascination he had over her; but I left home, and when I went back to claim my bride, she was gone, and people said, with that man whom I hated, and who in boyhood was my rival."

"What cared I for the rank I had won in the army? Nothing, for I gave it up and became a dweller in Indian camps to find him whom I had sworn to kill, and now I know the end cannot be far away."

"Now tell me: do you wish to go back to your old life, and in the end be strung up as an outlaw, for the days of the Prairie Tigers are numbered, or do you wish to change your life, and aid me in bringing them to justice?"

"I'm on ther trail with you, pard," was the answer of Angel Dave, who dropped back into his old way of speaking once more.

"Enough; I trust you, and we will decide what is best to be done," and Fancy Frank turned to Wildbird, who had been a silent listener to all, and her face showed that she was deeply moved by what she heard.

"Yesterday, no price, no inducement could have made me betray the Mad Colonel and his band; to-day I think differently, and I will aid you," said the woman, in a low, distinct voice.

"How and when?" asked Fancy Frank.

"You are a physician, I believe?" she said, turning to the Scout.

"Yes."

"Do you ever carry any medicines with you now?"

"Yes; I have a small case of medicines, and also of surgical instruments in my saddle pockets, which I have often found of use; are you ill?"

"Yes, and the pain is here," and she laid her hand upon her heart; but in a low tone she added: "Have you any poison in your case?"

"I have one that is most deadly indeed; why do you ask?"

"Give me it, and then I need a powerful opiate, if you have such."

"May I ask why?"

"Do not ask, for I can only answer that they are to aid you in capturing the Prairie Tigers."

"When?"

"To-morrow night; Dave will lead you to the Pass, and the guards there, at midnight, shall be under the influence of your opiate; once in the Pass, and, if you bring a hundred men with you, the Tigers are at your mercy."

"Enough! I will trust you—Ha! who comes there?" and Fancy Frank turned his eyes across the prairie, over the roll of which, a league away, came two horsemen at a gallop.

The Black Specter raised a small glass to her eyes and said quietly:

"It is your friend of the Iron Face, and an Indian I gave chase to some days ago; see, he looks down, as though following a trail."

"It is mine, and he will come to this spot; I am glad he is coming."

"I care not to see him, so give me the opiate and poison."

Fancy Frank stepped to where Ebony awaited him, and took from his saddle-pocket two small vials, one containing a powder, the other a few drops of colorless liquid.

"Here is the opiate, and this is the poison," he said, as she held forth her hand eagerly for them.

"I thank you; now I will leave you, so remember, to-morrow night."

"I shall not forget."

The woman sprung lightly into her saddle, and with a wave of her hand rode away at a sweeping gallop back toward the mountains.

CHAPTER XXV.

ANGEL DAVE IN THE LION'S DEN.

FOR some moments after the departure of Wildbird neither Fancy Frank or Angel Dave spoke, the former seeming lost in deep thought, and the latter keeping his eyes on the approaching horsemen.

At length he said, uneasily:

"Pard, I hain't wholly in love with that chap comin' yonder with ther iron face, an' p'r'aps I'd better light out, too, an' jine yer arter he has levanted."

"No, he will not harm you, knowing that you are to aid us."

"The settlers will want ter hev me in at ther hangin' match, I guesses."

"I'll protect you, Dave; but after the Tigers are nabbed I would advise you to seek a more healthy region."

"I'll do it, pard, fer I guesses this climate are a leetle consumptive to a feller with a delikit natur' like mine; but isn't yonder Iron Face a howlin' devil on wheels, an' ther horse he rides are a locomotive on stilts, fer jist see how he's a climbin' this heur hill, an' ther red hain't way back down ther lane fer tearin' along nuther?"

The Man of the Iron Face was now within range of the thicket, and he and the Indian suddenly drew rein, as though their quick eyes had detected danger ahead.

But Fancy Frank stepped out in full sight, and waved his hat in welcome, and Captain Crimson and his red ally came on at a gallop, and the two splendid-looking men clasped hands warmly, while Angel Dave and Red Snake eyed each other with a look that showed there was no love between them.

"Well, Powell, I took your trail, fearing you might get in trouble and need a friendly hand," said Captain Crimson, pleasantly.

"You were very kind, captain, and I am glad you have come, for I have news for you."

"So it would seem, when I see who is your companion."

"I tole yer, pard, thet Capt'in Crimson an' myself was acquainted; we don't need no in-trydoocin, I kin tell yer, as he licked me one night at ther post fer cheatin' a nigger at keards, an' ef he hed knowed I war a Tiger I guesses he'd called in my checks."

"I remember you, sir, and I would warn Doctor Powell against you," was the stern reply.

"Oh, he knows me, pard; raised me from a pup in ther ole Mohawk valley; an' we is thick as parsons now, fer he's fergive me my trespasses thet I trespassed ag'in him."

"I know the man, Captain Crimson, and though he was a member of the Mad Colonel's band he is now our ally, and when I tell you that to-morrow night he leads us into the stronghold of the Tigers, you may know that I have not come here for an idle purpose."

"You do not fear treachery, Powell?"

"Not I; we hunt the Tigers in their den to-morrow night, and if you will ride to the fort and get Captain Carleton and his troop, I will go back to Eldorado City and return with all the emigrants I can raise, and meet you at the river an hour after sunrise to-morrow."

"I will be there with the troop, and, as we have little time to lose, we had better start now," answered Iron Face, and a few moments after the four men started on the back trail for the fort and Eldorado City.

Riding rapidly on their way the four horsemen reached the ford at sunset, and there they divided their forces, Fancy Frank and Angel Dave heading away toward Eldorado City and Captain Crimson and Red Snake going in the direction of the fort.

Arriving at Social Hall, Fancy Frank dismounted, and telling Angel Dave to follow, boldly entered the saloon, where already had gathered half a hundred men, drinking, playing cards and chatting about the new settlement and its prospects.

Every eye fell upon the Scout and his companion as they entered, and, though a brave man, Angel Dave could not repress a tremor of fear, for he knew that many would recognize him as one of the Prairie Tiger band.

"Hallo, White Beaver, what news?" cried Henry Maverick, coming forward.

"Have a drink with us, Guide?" called out another, while a third asked:

"In the devil's name! who have you there, Frank?"

"A friend of mine; what will you drink, Dave?" was the quiet response of the Guide, as he and his companion turned toward the bar.

"Then I must say, White Beaver, that you keep devilish bad company," said a tall herdsman, coming forward.

"That's so; he's one o' the Tiger gang, for I knows him; up with him, lads!" cried another.

At this Angel Dave half drew his revolver, determined to die game; but Fancy Frank checked the movement, and said, in a low tone:

"Keep cool, Dave, for they will not harm you."

"All right, pard, I'll foller your lead," was Dave's response, while, raising his voice, as the crowd began to press around, with excited manner and angry words, he said:

"Men, I say this is my friend, and the man who insults him quarrels with me."

"Well, I don't hesitate to take the risk of a quarrel with you, Fancy Frank," and Carter Grey, who seemed to have forgotten the lesson taught him by Iron Face at the motte, or hated the Guide on account of his friendship for Captain Crimson, insolently confronted the two men, as they stood side by side, their backs against the bar.

"I want no quarrel with you, Carter Grey; I came here with my friend on an important mission, and before I can explain you wish to attack me, so all I can say is, hands off, or this settlement will have the wherewithal to start a graveyard in the morning."

There was no braggadocio in the tone of Fancy Frank, and those who knew him felt that he would be as good as his word, and urged an explanation to be given of why he came into Social Hall, with a man known to be one of the worst of the band of Prairie Tigers; but the hot-heads, having imbibed "liquid lightning," baptized rum, pretty freely, were in for trouble, and the large herdsman, Jack Daws, reached for Angel Dave, as he cried out:

"You're all right, White Beaver; but this gentleman must swing."

Straight out from the shoulder went a blow from Fancy Frank, and Jack Daws was knocked against his backers with a force that made them reel.

But instantly he returned to the fray, a revolver in hand, and half a dozen more had also drawn their weapons, and Fancy Frank and Angel Dave stood at bay, ready to fire at a movement or a word.

It was a critical moment, and yet none dare interfere, for a word, a motion, might bring on a desperate conflict, which many wished to avoid, while others present, the influx from Canyon City, were anxious for a row.

Suddenly, in the midst of this instant of peril, and when it could be seen that Jack Daws and Carter Grey were going to force the fight, the door swung open, and in strode Captain Crimson of the Iron Face.

A hum ran over the crowd as the masked man walked deliberately between the two parties, and said, in his deep tones:

"Hal, Powell, are you in trouble?"

"These gentlemen object to my being in company with Dave here, and threaten to hang him, which they can only do by stepping over my body."

"Gentlemen, my friend Doctor Powell has business with this man, and my advice is to let him alone," and the iron face was turned toward the angry crowd.

"Don't mind the words of a man who dodges justice behind a mask," cried Carter Grey, in an insolent tone.

But the words had scarcely left his lips when Captain Crimson sprung toward him, but was met by a shot, the bullet ringing as it struck his iron face, and glancing off shattered a mirror to fragments.

Then, before any one knew how it happened, half a dozen pistol-shots were heard, mingled with cries, groans, curses and stamping feet, and the affair had ended in a twinkling.

But on the floor lay three dead bodies, and among them were Carter Grey and Jack Daws, and at the bar stood three men, one of whom coolly said:

"Come, Powell, you and your friend join me in a drink, for I guess there will be no more trouble; come, gentlemen, it is my treat; take something," and Captain Crimson looked over the crowd that began to come slowly out of the corners, and rise from behind tables and benches, where they had taken refuge, and approach the bar, while Angel Dave said earnestly:

"Pard, you is hell on wheels in a fight, and Dave Titus owes you a life; and bullits! why, they does yer good, as I hes seen, an' I'll hev my tailor rig me out a suit like yourn jist ter let ther boys practice on me fer a target; ef I don't I is a howlin' liar."

The drink was taken, the crowd hiding the dead from sight as they pressed around the bar, and then Fancy Frank said, in his pleasant way:

"Gentlemen, as my friend, Captain Crimson, has just explained to you, that I had a right to bring this gentleman here with me, I will now say that the services of every man in this saloon are needed to-morrow, so let him come mounted, armed and provisioned for a three days' jaunt, and meet me here at the break of dawn."

An excited murmur ran through the crowd, and many questions were asked as to the motive; but the Guide only explained that he wanted three score men to meet him in the morning, and, turning, he left Social Hall, accompanied by Captain Crimson and Angel Dave.

"Well, captain, I have again to thank you for timely aid," said the Guide, when they had left the saloon.

"It was an accident my being there, for I sent Red Snake on to the fort with word to Captain Castleton to prepare, and that I would

be along after awhile, and I came to the city to discover just what force you could bring, for it would not do to leave the valley defenseless, you know."

"No; but I will ask Skeleton Sam and Rattling Kettle to remain and be on the watch to warn the settlers; and you might ask the commandante to send down a few soldiers, as Black Kettle may make a raid into Eldorado City."

"I will; and you will have about fifty men?"

"Yes, perhaps sixty; but do you go at once to the fort?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps Dave better accompany you, as some may seek trouble with him."

"I hesn't many friends, that's a fact, an' I guesses ef my funeral was ter come off here, an' only those who respected and loved me for my virtues was to attend, ther percession w'd be kinder slim," said Dave.

"Come, Dave, I'll take care of you; good-night, Powell," and Captain Crimson and the reformed Tiger rode away in the direction of the fort, while Fancy Frank mounted his horse and headed down the valley for Hope Haven, as Maud Malcolm had named their new home in the Far West.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHITE BEAVER MAKES AN UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY.

To say that Fancy Frank had forgotten Bessie Ray, the sweetheart of his boyhood days, would be untrue, for, though she had been fascinated by another lover, and fled with him in a moment of temptation, she had been forgiven by the man she had wronged, and he had sworn to track her betrayer to his death, when he learned that her whole life had been made wretched, and that she had died, as he believed, of a broken heart.

From Angel Dave he had learned the truth of Bessie's sad fate, and feeling that a few more hours would bring retribution upon the man who had brought such a bitter doom upon her, he turned his horse in the direction of Hope Haven, where dwelt one who had been constantly in his thoughts since they had met months before.

That one was Maud Malcolm, and each day he had been with her on the long march she had grown dearer to him, as he had to her, for his noble nature, lion-like courage, wonderful skill and noble appearance had won her heart, while her regard was founded upon gratitude for the service rendered her father, and all he had done for the train on the long trail westward.

"I will see her to-night, but not yet will I breathe to her a word of love; no, no, not until poor Bessie has been avenged, and then I will be free to tell her how dear she is to me," he said, as he rode toward Hope Haven.

There was a new look upon everything around the commodious and comfortable cabin home, for logs lay about the yard, and several out-houses were yet uncompleted; but the residence was situated upon a hill that gently sloped to the river, and here and there were trees, and a natural lawn, giving promise in time of making a most desirable dwelling-place.

Lights were visible in the windows, of what Fancy Frank knew to be the sitting-room, and the major's bed-room, and leaving Ebony to await his coming, and feed upon the juicy grass while awaiting, he approached the house, Snapper and Guard, the watch-dogs, recognizing him, and greeting him with a friendly bark.

In passing the sitting-room window Fancy Frank glanced within, and then he stopped short; and he seemed like one turned to marble, so motionless did he stand.

The room was large, and was furnished comfortably with furniture brought in one of the wagons, and with a lamp on the center-table, looked very cosy and inviting.

But it was not the pleasant room that riveted the attention of Fancy Frank, and caused him to stand in silence gazing within.

What he saw was a tableau that sent a chill to his heart, for two persons were in the room, the one, Maud Malcolm, and the other Ross Elliott.

And the two were standing near the table, and their arms were around each other, and the sight brought anguish to the heart of the lover who stood without and gazed within.

"Oh, God! she loves him and not me; oh, how hard is this to bear! Yet not one word of reproach will I visit upon her, though Heaven knows she gave me every reason to hope that she cared for me."

"No, it was my vanity that led me astray, for she loves the boy not the man."

He strode quickly on, and knocked at the major's door.

Instantly it was opened by the major, who ushered him into the room, where sat Mrs. Malcolm, whose face was growing whiter, thinner and sadder each day, and Violet Vassar, who was the very impersonation of health and beauty.

"Come in, Powell, we are delighted to see you; but what ails you, man, for you are as white as though you had seen a ghost," said the major.

"No, I have seen something far more real,

major; but I am all right, only fatigued with a long ride, though I will have to take the saddle again at dawn, and I have come to tell you an important matter," and Fancy Frank made known the intended raid upon the Prairie Tigers, though he did not speak of the part the Black Specter had taken in it.

"I will accompany you with pleasure, Powell, for once rid of these Tigers and we can easily run old Kettle and his band to earth, but now, as it is, we are between two fires; but have some supper, and stay all night, for we have room, as you know."

But Fancy Frank refused the major's invitation, and soon after took his leave, going back to Social Hall, where he knew he could get a room, as the place pretended to be an inn, as well as a saloon.

But once there, his bitter sorrow at what he had discovered, prevented sleep from visiting him, and entering the saloon he joined a party at cards, and until the dawn was near the game went on.

Then the settlers began to arrive one by one, and in squads, until three score well-mounted and thoroughly armed men set out on the "Tiger-hunt," as the major called it, and at their head, grim, silent, and sad of heart, rode Fancy Frank.

A few miles, and the ford was reached, and already awaiting them, for Loyd Carleton was a stirring soldier when there was a fight ahead, was the squadron of cavalry, equal in numbers to the settlers.

A quiet greeting between the two meeting forces, and with Fancy Frank, Iron Face and Angel Dave in advance, Captain Carleton, Major Malcolm and Ross Elliott following, and the soldiers and settlers bringing up the rear, the determined band set forth for the stronghold of the Mad Colonel and his Prairie Tigers.

But they had not ridden far before a horseman suddenly dashed over the hill in front of them, and apparently unexpected such a startling sight as a body of men upon the march, for he wheeled quickly to the right-about, and dashed spurs into his horse, while a chorus of voices shouted:

"It is Devil Dick!"

With the name half a hundred horsemen were in pursuit, and among them Frank Powell and Ross Elliott, while Iron Face was temporarily absent on a reconnaissance.

As the horsemen got down to the chase, for Devil Dick was three-quarters of a mile ahead, they began to stretch out in a line, according to the speed of their steeds, and the animal ridden by Fancy Frank gradually forged to the front, and as steadily gained upon the steed in advance.

Seeing that they had no chance to overtake the fugitive, mounted as he was, the men gradually dropped out of the chase, leaving Fancy Frank and several others to pursue the fugitive, and they did not doubt but that the Scout would render a good account of himself, for they had perfect confidence in him.

It is true that some longed for the presence of the Man of the Iron Face, wishing that he had been near when Devil Dick rode in view; but it was only on account of his horse, and not himself, for all knew the wonderful speed of the animal ridden by the masked man.

Steadily gaining upon the fugitive, Fancy Frank at last followed him into a canyon, and it nearly proved fatal to him, as Devil Dick had noted the dropping off of his pursuers, and instead of continuing his rapid flight, had wheeled into a thicket and awaited the coming of his enemy, determined to rid himself of him, and then continue on to the stronghold.

By one of those strange accidents that sometimes occur, and which seem unaccountable, the steed of Fancy Frank trod on a stone just as Devil Dick touched the trigger of his rifle, and fell to the earth, hurling his rider over his head.

But Fancy Frank was as agile as a cat and quick as lightning in his movements, and caught nimbly on his feet, to confront Devil Dick as he dashed from his cover, thinking he had brought down his foe.

There was no time to draw revolvers, for the men came full against each other, and grappled instantly, each holding firmly to the other, to prevent the use of either knife or pistol.

"This is child's play; let us release our right hands and draw our knives and end this," hissed Devil Dick.

"As you please, though I could hold you as you are until some of my men come up and then give you a death fitting your career," was the reply of Fancy Frank, as he suddenly released his grasp upon Devil Dick's arm and seized his knife, while his foe also grasped a weapon, and the two sprung back several feet apart; but the weapon seized from his belt by Devil Dick was not a knife, but a revolver, and it covered the heart of Fancy Frank, while an expression of fiendish devilry came over the face of the man who now held him in his power.

"Coward, I said knife, not pistol; but I for get such as you know no honor, and deserve to die for my foolish forgetfulness; but blaze away, for I fear not to die," and Fancy Frank

looked his enemy squarely in the eyes, with no sign of fear in his handsome face.

"Frank Powell, your tribe are going to have a sickly season of it, for I intend to kill their chief," sneered Devil Dick.

"Talk less and shoot more, coward!"

"I intend to kill you."

"I believe you fear to kill one who looks you squarely in the face."

"You shall see," and the pistol was slowly raised to a level; but the delay was fatal to him, for in his ear came a ringing report, and bounding high in the air Devil Dick fell his full length upon the ground.

A moment after Ross Elliott dashed upon the scene, his smoking rifle in hand, and cried:

"Thank God, Doctor Powell, I was in time."

"Oh God! my life saved by his hand," muttered Fancy Frank, and he tottered back as though suddenly overcome by weakness.

But a mighty effort of will rendered him himself once more, and in the nobleness of his nature he grasped the hand of the young man, and said firmly:

"Elliott, you saved my life, and you will ever find me your friend; may your life know only joy; come, let us return to the command."

Ten minutes after, having left Devil Dick where he had fallen, the two were riding back to join their comrades; but Fancy Frank was moody and silent.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BILLY BUTTON'S MISSION.

BACK to the stronghold of the Prairie Tigers, I ask my reader to accompany me, and on the eve of the night that is to usher in the betrayal of the outlaws by two who would have been the last to be suspected of treachery.

It is at that hour between daylight and darkness, twilight, which in city or country, in the wilds or on the sea, always impresses one's nature more deeply than any other time.

Out in front of his cabin sits the Mad Colonel in a rustic chair, while up the valley floats a voice in song, and occasionally the bark of a dog or neigh of a horse is heard.

The brow of the Mad Colonel is clouded, for the night before, when he was pacing to and fro, his heart a whirl of emotions at the thought that he had betrayed into Black Kettle's hands the woman, whose only fault was in loving him, she had suddenly ridden up to the cabin.

"Why, Bird, I thought you had gone to Kettle's camp for me?" he had said, with a guilty tremor.

"No, I was deterred from so doing by the Scout, Fancy Frank, who discovered me," was the cool response.

"Why, your horse is as fleet as the wind, and—"

"You forget that he rides Ebony, whom he took the night I was captured by Captain Crimson."

"Ah! I had forgotten that; but you are such a skillful plainswoman I should have thought you could have dodged him some way."

"I did not try to, for Captain Crimson and his Indian ally also appeared in sight, and—"

"Not near these hills, I hope?"

"Oh, no."

"You did right to return; but to-morrow you can start again, for I am anxious to communicate with Kettle."

She made no reply, and the night and following day passed away, and thus we find the Mad Colonel sitting in moody thought before his cabin door.

"Where are you going, Wildbird?" he asked, as the woman came out of the cabin.

"On my usual round to see the sick," was the answer, as she drew her cloak around her more closely and walked on, while the Mad Colonel muttered:

"I am not capable of loving any woman, for I believed I loved her, and she has done naught to forfeit my regard; but the sight of Maud Malcolm's face has made me desire to get rid of her, and kill her, as I did poor Bessie, I will not, for that is one of my bitterest memories; and Rose Russell, what has become of her, I wonder?"

"She was a splendid girl, so gentle, so loving; but the night she found out that I was married, and that our marriage was false, she was a perfect tigress, and she made me fear her; by Heaven, I was glad to take Bird and leave for parts unknown, as I know she would have killed me."

"But I have sworn to get possession of Maud Malcolm, and I will, come what may, and if I can only win her love, I'll give up this mad life I lead, and live in foreign lands, for I certainly have hoarded up treasure enough."

And thus mused on, and plotted the evil man, while Wildbird went among the outlaw cabins, and sent several of those who she knew had no sympathy in the wicked life they were forced to lead, up to the meadow-lands in the mountains, under a pretense of bringing back horses that the Colonel needed.

A secret path led across the river to these hidden meadow-lands, where the outlaw stock pastured under several herdsmen, and having tried to save those she wished to escape the at-

tack, she wended her way to a small hut, in which was heard a voice in song.

Pushing the door open she entered, and a youth of eighteen arose to greet her.

"Billy Buttons, I have something I wish you to do for me."

"I is willin', ther Lord knows," answered the youth, who was a simple fellow that had been a captive in the outlaw camp for years, and whom the men were not wont to treat kindly.

"Do you see this jug?" and she drew back her cloak.

"I hes my eye on it."

"Well, at ten o'clock go to the Pass and tell the guards there that you have some medicine I sent for the sick; of course there are no sick there, but you say it was your mistake, and lead them to think that the jug contains whisky and let them have a drink all round; then come back to my stable and wait for me there, no matter how long you have to remain, for I wish you to go with me to-night, and if you have any valuables or money you had better take them with you."

"Oh, I has a heap I has stole from ther boys; 'tain't no harm, fer they killed folks ter steal 'em, an' I don't kill nobody."

"That is right; now you understand what I wish you to do?"

"I does fer a Gospil fact."

"Speak to no one of what I have told you, and await me at the stables."

"I'll be thar," answered the youth, taking the jug and placing it in his bunk, which served the place of a bed, while Wildbird retraced her way to her own cabin, which, for an outlaw's abode was far from being uncomfortable.

For some time the boy went on with his song, until his room-mates coming in to retire made him hush, although his voice was not unmusical.

Waiting until he was assured that they slept, Billy Buttons arose and took up his jug, and wended his way up to the Pass.

Six men were there on duty, seated around a fire playing cards, and ready to act, should the one sentinel at the outer end of the Pass give the signal of alarm.

"You is healthy sick folks, I guesses," said Billy, approaching.

"Sick! Who said we was sick?" growled one of the outlaws.

"Missus said so; said she, 'Billy Buttons, I hes some med'cine here fer sick folks,' said she, 'an' I wants yer,' she said, 'ter give it to 'em, fer it's ther 'Lixer o' Life,' she said."

"Licker o' life, Billy; then I is sartin sick, yer kin gamble on it, an' I'll try a dose, tho' I guesses you is off ther trail as she sent it to ther boys in ther cabins, an' you didn't have sense enough to know whar ter take it."

"She said ther sick, an' I was a-lookin' fer 'em, for this are prime as I tasted it myself."

"It's med'cine you say?"

"It are."

"Pills?"

"You durned fool who ever heerd o' pills in a jug," and Billy brought the jug round in full view.

"Jerusha! I guess jugs don't ever hev nothin' in 'em thet hain't good; they hadn't oughter fer ther sake o' ther whisky they was made fer."

"You is right, Dan; ef ther med'cine's in a jug, an' I sees as it are, I guesses it can't be so bad ter 'rastle with, so we'll try a leetle."

"But it are fer sick folks," said Billy.

"Billy Buttons, ev'ry durned galoot in this heur keerd party are in invalids with ragin' fevers; let me feel o' ther outside o' thet jug, Billy, so as ter see ther natur' o' ther med'cine within."

Billy Buttons seemed to give it to him reluctantly, and the man drew out the cork and put his Roman nose to the jug, giving a long and vigorous inhalation.

"Boys, this med'cine hev a whisky foundation, an' I hain't afeerd to try a leetle with sich a foundation even if it were p'izen."

As he spoke he placed the jug to his nose again, saying:

"It smells like whisky."

Pouring a little in his hand, and eying it closely he remarked:

"It looks like whisky."

Then he put his mouth to it and took a long pull, and said vehemently:

"By Jiminy! it are whisky."

This was enough for the others, who were instantly on their feet, and thrice the jug went round, the men laughing at poor Billy's protestations, and one of them at last returning the jug, with the remark:

"Thar, Billy Buttons, thar is ther jug, an' ther med'cine is in ther bottom, an' must be shaken before taken; tell ther pretty Specter we is better now."

Billy angrily seized the jug, and went away grumbling, while the outlaws resumed their card-playing; but one by one they became drowsy, and in half an hour they were all unconscious from the effects of the opiate the Black Specter had drugged them with.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A WRONG RIGHTED.

WAS it a presentiment of coming evil that made the Mad Colonel pace to and fro in his

cabin after the chilly night had driven him in from outdoors?

It would seem so, for he was strangely restless, and his brow was dark and his lips set, while Wildbird, with pale face, but quiet mien, sat at the table reading.

"You are restless to-night, Colonel," she said, after a while, looking up.

"Yes; somehow I am in just the mood to start off on some mad expedition to drown thought, and have half a mind to call the men up and go on a raid to the settlement."

Wildbird was alarmed, for she knew his impulsive nature, and it would be just like him to dash away at the head of the Tigers and carry torch and death into Eldorado City, and what was still worse, she knew that he meditated harm toward Maud Malcolm or Violet Vassar, and perhaps both.

Getting up, she went into another room to hide her feelings, and from her lips came the whispered words:

"Oh, God! I had gotten that poison to end my unhappy life when I heard the first tramp of the coming avengers; but Maud and Violet must be saved, and all these poor dwellers in the valley below, and if he attempts to go, then shall he drink the fatal draught."

She composed herself by a mighty effort, and returning to the room found the Colonel drawing on his heavy riding-boots, and on the table were laid out his revolvers, to be carefully reloaded.

It was now eleven o'clock, and she knew that the band could be gotten into the saddle and be out of the Pass within half an hour, and should they descend by another trail to the valley, or the avengers under Fancy Frank be delayed, the outlaws would dash upon the settlement by dawn and carry destruction before them.

"Are you going out?" she asked, composedly.

"Yes, I'll make a visit to Eldorado, and I wish you to accompany me to the ford, and then branch off for Kettle's camp."

"Have you aroused the band?"

"No; go and tell Bones to go to each cabin and tell the Tigers to go at once to the Pass."

Wildbird went out of the cabin, but she did not knock at the small hut in which Bones, the negro servant of the Mad Colonel lived; but, after a short delay returned, and her face was ashen in hue, as she asked:

"Must I go, too?"

"You must."

"And what are your intentions regarding the Malcolms?"

"That I shall decide after they are in my power."

"I will hesitate no longer," said Wildbird, between her teeth, and, aloud, she remarked:

"I will fill our brandy-flasks, and perhaps you had better take a drink, for the night is chill."

"A good suggestion; give me some brandy, for it may serve to calm my fevered brain," he said, eagerly.

She went to a cupboard and poured out a glass half full of the fiery liquor and placed it upon the table, at which he sat loading his pistols.

Having finished one revolver he placed it in its holster, and, raising the glass to his lips, dashed off the contents, while Wildbird had gone into the other room.

Returning, she saw that he had taken the fatal draught, for in it she had poured the colorless poison given her by White Beaver.

"Now he is doomed; but God knows I acted to save them!" she groaned through her shut teeth.

A few moments more passed, and then the Mad Colonel sprang to his feet, crying out, harshly:

"In hell's name! what is the matter with me?"

She stood like a statue gazing upon him, and saw him stagger backward and drop upon the low bed, while he cried out in terror:

"Great God! am I dying? Is this heart disease? Quick! give me more brandy," and he sunk back powerless to move, while his eyes stared upon her.

Approaching him she said:

"Harvey Vertner, no human power can save you now."

"In God's name what mean you?" and he tried to rise, but his limbs were powerless.

"I mean that you carried to your own lips the fatal draught that will end your life within the hour," was the low, calm reply.

"Poisoned! Great God! have you poisoned me, Nina?"

"I put the poison in the glass and you drank it; may God forgive me the sin, but it was to save those I love from your hellish fury."

"No, no, no, you have not poisoned me; only given me a drug to frighten me," he groaned.

"You are powerless to move, and your brain will soon fail you, too; then death will come."

"No, no, I am not fit to die."

"You are not fit to live, for you dragged poor Bessie Ray to ruin, and then took her life; you married another poor woman who is now in a lunatic asylum through your treatment, and you destroyed the happiness of Rose Ros-

sell, and then took her father's life."

"And how have you not sinned against me?"

You ruined my father, and bound me to you by a false marriage, for you had a wife living, even though she was mad; ay, and you it was that killed my poor brother; but through all I have clung to you until hate in my heart took the place of love, when I knew the fate you intended should be mine—"

"Silence, woman! Ho, without there! I'll have you slain before my eyes, thou accursed fiend," shouted the man, writhing in his vain effort to rise, while his livid face showed that death was rapidly placing its seal upon him.

"No, your men sleep in their cabins, Harvey Vertner, the guard of the Pass lie asleep under an opiate I sent them, and even now Fancy Frank and the settlers and Captain Carleton and his troopers are coming to wipe out the Prairie Tigers from off the face of God's green earth they too long have polluted.

"No, I am avenged, Harvey Vertner, for all thy crimes upon me and mine, and Death rights my wrongs."

"Curses! oh, curses upon you!" broke in a hoarse whisper from the man's lips, now stained with froth and blood, for he drove his sharp teeth again and again into the flesh.

Then his eyes closed, and she believed him dead; but suddenly there came a volley of musketry, the sound of iron hoofs, and loud cries in the retreat, and the Mad Colonel again opened his eyes and made a vain effort to rise, while he shouted:

"Ho! Tigers! to the rescue! oh, curses! I am wounded, for I cannot rise; but cut them down! show no mercy to man or woman! hurrah! follow me, Tigers, and I will lead you to the depths of hell!"

A half-suppressed shout, and Harvey Vertner, the Mad Colonel, was dead, while, with staring eyes, Nina, the woman he had cruelly wronged, stood gazing upon him, and to her ears came the shouts without, and the noise of the conflict, for though taken by surprise the Tigers were fighting bravely.

"Oh God! the end has come, and I must fly from here," she suddenly cried, and then she continued in a low tone:

"He is dead now, and toward the dead I must not hold ill-will—good-by, Harvey," and she drew a step nearer, and laid her hand upon his; "good-by, Harvey; you are dead and I forgive you now," and bending over she imprinted a kiss upon his forehead, just as the door burst open, and in sprang Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face, a revolver in each hand.

"Ha! this is the den of—"

He started back, for his eyes fell upon the woman, who said firmly and distinctly:

"Of him whom men call the Mad Colonel, but who was Harvey Vertner."

"Great God! I have tracked that man for years, to avenge a sister's wrongs, and the wrong he did me—"

He paused suddenly and sprang toward the bed, shouting forth:

"Ha! ha! ha! it is Harvey Vertner, and—"

"He is dead," said the woman.

"Dead! no, he surely cannot be dead! no, no, Death would not cheat me of my revenge on him," and he placed his hand upon his heart.

"He is dead, for I righted the wrong he did me."

"And you! who are you?" and he turned upon the woman who had drawn over her face her black veil at his entrance.

"I am one he has deeply wronged—"

"By Heaven, I shall see that face," and springing forward he tore the veil away, and the white, beautiful face was revealed.

"Great God! Nina, my sister, I believed you dead," he said, in almost inarticulate tones.

"Your sister! who and what are you?" she asked, in a hoarse whisper.

Instantly he placed his hands to his head and touching a spring drew off the iron mask he wore, dashing it upon the floor.

"Oh, God, I thank Thee; you are my brother Harold," almost shrieked the woman, throwing herself upon his broad mail-covered breast.

"Ha! who called the name of Harold Malcolm?" cried a loud voice, and Major Malcolm dashed into the room, followed by Fancy Frank.

But one look upon the stern, handsome face and he recognized the son he had believed dead, and tottering he would have fallen, had not Fancy Frank caught him.

"Harold! my dead boy, arisen to life again?" he gasped.

"Ay, father, I am Harold your son—whom that man lying there, Harvey Vertner, sought to kill, and nearly succeeded; but thanks to Powell here, who found me sorely wounded in a motte, where your old Jack had taken me, I was nursed back to life."

"I recall you now; your servant fled, believing us Indians, and I had you carried to my camp, where it was pull Dick pull Devil for your life; I am glad to meet you again, Mr. Malcolm."

"I told you I owed you a service I could never repay, Powell; but of course you did not know me, as I assumed this disguise and rigged myself out in armor, determined that no one should believe me alive, until I had avenged

my sister's honor, and slain Harvey Vertner, who brought a curse upon our name; but, father, here is another glad surprise for you—"

"The death of the Mad Colonel; so you killed him?" said Fancy Frank.

"No, he died by his own hand," said Harold Malcolm, anxious to shield his sister from the deed.

"The coward! he cheated me of my revenge," said Fancy Frank.

"With all his sins, I did not believe him a coward, to take his own life to escape punishment. Yes, it is Harvey Vertner, once the King of Diamonds, and now the outlaw chief of the Tigers; oh, that he could speak to tell me of my poor child," groaned Major Malcolm, glancing earnestly into the pallid, upturned face of the dead man.

"I am here, father."

"What!" and the old man again swayed wildly, as if overcome with glad surprise or sickening doubt.

"Yes, father, through all his crimes, poor Nina was true to the man you gave her to," and Harold Malcolm stepped forward and raised Nina from the low seat she had sunk upon to hide herself from view, and to feast her eyes upon the glad sight of her father's and her brother's faces.

"My child! my poor, poor Nina," and the two were in each other's arms, while stepping to the door and closing it Harold Malcolm said in a low tone:

"Father, none need know the sad secret of poor Nina's life, other than our noble friend here, and I too may remain as a mystery, so we will start at once for the nearest station, and go to my home in Texas, for I have been very successful there as a stock-raiser; there you can join us, selling out your interests here, where only painful memories must haunt us all."

"You are right, my son, and you are wise," said the major.

"And I will accompany you, until you reach the railroad," remarked Fancy Frank.

"What, are we to lose you, too?" asked the major.

"Yes; that man dead, I can now return to my tribe, the Winnebagoes, of which nation you know I am counselor and Medicine-chief," said Fancy Frank, with a sad smile.

"Then let us start at once, before the men gather and the secret becomes known," and taking up his iron mask Harold Malcolm replaced it upon his face, and a few moments after a party of five persons rode away from the cabin of the Mad Colonel.

Those five were Harold Malcolm and his sorrowing sister Nina, Fancy Frank, who was turning his back forever upon the woman he loved, and leaving her to another, a rival who had saved his life, by which act he had disarmed his hatred of him, and Angel Dave, now most anxious to cling to his old schoolmate of long ago, and Billy Buttons.

"I know the secret path, follow me!" said Nina quietly, and she led the way across the river toward the mountains, while behind her followed the others, all buried in their own thoughts, excepting Billy Buttons whose heart was as light as a feather in weal or woe.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A BACKWARD GLANCE.

LEAVING Fancy Frank and his party to continue on to the nearest railroad station, I will ask my reader to return with me to the cabin of the Mad Colonel, over whose body Major Malcolm stood guard, pacing the room with quick, nervous steps, his head bent down, his hands clasped behind his back, and his whole attitude that of a man who lived not then in the present but far back in the past.

And true it was, for he was living over again a few bitter years of the long ago, and, in memory's mirror that the dead body of Harvey Vertner held up before his face, and casting its reflections into his heart, he was floating down the mighty Mississippi in one of the grand palaces, the pride of the rolling torrent to which the Indians gave the name of Father of Waters.

The moon was riding in a cloudless sky, lighting up the murky waters with a silvery gloss, and glimmering upon the white villas of the planters, from which floated strains of music borne on a balmy, perfumed air; but from these scenes, ever varying, he had turned into the brilliantly-lighted cabin, where were gathered the passengers, talking, singing, writing or playing cards; before these latter he had paused, as if drawn thither by a fascination he could not resist.

Long, without on the guard, he had struggled with himself to resist the temptation, struggled as the drunkard struggles to put from him the intoxicating cup; but he had fallen, and, as the memory of that fall sweeps before him on memory's tireless pinions, he groans aloud as he paces the cabin and shuts his teeth more firmly.

Tempted, he sat down, and ere long all but one arose from the table, for the stakes ran too high.

That one was a gambler, and well he remembered him as he was then; his face strangely youthful and womanly in its beauty and fas-

cinations, a beauty which death even had not robbed him of, and the thinking man cast a furtive look at the dead.

But the devil lurked beneath the man's beauty, and he arose from that table after midnight with Burt Malcolm in his power; he had played for a high stake, the hand of Nina Malcolm, and he had won.

But bitter had been that winning, for to gain her he had taken her brother's life, had played a double part, and had fled with her, not to scenes of joy, but to scenes of desolation and crime.

And then had followed reckless dissipation for Major Malcolm, mad gambling revels, and at last ruin.

But the courage of the man was not broken by the loss of his fortune, for, in heart there was yet left a germ that budded forth into a new life, cast the bitter past behind him, and caused him to trample under foot the temptations that had lured him on, and seek in the far West a new home for those he had yet left to him.

But he had hoped, almost against hope, to one day find the man who had crushed his life, and stolen from him his child; and at last that hope had been realized, for that man, once Kent Conrad, the King of Diamonds, now the Mad Colonel, lay dead within reach of his arm, and his own daughter Nina he had folded in his arms, a repentant, returning prodigal who had suffered more than tongue could tell.

And more, the brave boy he had long believed dead, was alive once more, and the cup of bitterness he had drunk to the dregs was now full to the brim with joy, and the latter days of his life had looming up before them a horizon tinged with happiness.

And, as this glance of retrospection swept over him, bringing joy at last, Major Malcolm halted before the dead, upturned face, still beautiful in death, and said in a low tone:

"Curse you! Harvey Vertner, ay, curse you, though you be dead, for the ruin you brought upon my child; but death has its seal upon thy heart now, and out of the gloom sunshine has come."

He paused, for he heard voices approaching, and a moment after there entered Captain Carleton and Henry Maverick, and between them they bore a slender form.

It was Ross Elliott, his face white, his lips set, and from his side welled a stream of blood.

CHAPTER XL.

ROSE ROSSELL.

"Is he dead?" and Major Malcolm sprang to the side of the youth he had learned to love so well.

"She is not dead, major, but I fear her case is hopeless," said Captain Carleton, sadly.

"She! whom do you mean, captain?" asked the major, in surprise.

The eyes opened wearily, and fixed themselves upon the face of Major Malcolm, while the words came faintly:

"Yes, major, I am not what I have appeared to you; I am a woman."

"A woman! Great heavens! can this be true?"

"It is true, Major Malcolm; I assumed this disguise to hunt down one who had wronged me bitterly, and who I am told is dead."

"Thank God! and thank God that I die, too."

"To whom do you refer, my poor girl?" asked the major, kindly.

"To him whom men call the Mad Colonel."

"Ha! you, too, one of his victims?"

"Yes; it is a long story, and I feel the life-current ebbing fast."

"I tell you the truth, I am not Ross Elliott, but Rose Rossell."

"My poor, poor child; but is there no hope?"

"No, Major Malcolm, and I rejoice that there is not, for I wish to die, and I asked them to bring me here that I might first see his face once more, for now that he is dead, I feel no enmity in my heart against him; raise me up, please, and let me see him."

She was taken tenderly up in the arms of the major and Carleton, and placed so as to see the dead form of Harvey Vertner.

"Put his hand in mine, please," she said, faintly, and Captain Carleton silently obeyed.

"Let me die thus, for I forgive him all; don't be impatient, my good friends, for I will not last long."

"Impatient! God knows, child, we would do anything in our power for you," groaned the major, who, with Carleton and Henry Maverick, was deeply moved at the touching scene.

Then slowly the eyelids drooped, the eyes still fixed upon the face of the dead outlaw, and with a sigh, the spirit of Rose Rossell had taken its flight from the body.

"I will bury them side by side, for so she would wish it," said Major Malcolm, brushing a tear from his eye.

"It's a pity to pollute the earth that holds her, by having his grave near it," broke in Henry Maverick, but Captain Carleton answered:

"She forgave him, Maverick, and died with his hand in hers, and they shall sleep side by side in death; see, I can hardly unclasp her hand."

"Well, we have gained a great victory, captain," said Major Malcolm.

"Yes, for the Tigers have been annihilated, major; but who has seen Iron Face and Frank Powell?"

"The last I saw of them, Carleton, they were following after the one they call the Black Specter, and going toward the river," replied the major, evasively.

"Well, they will bring her back, you may rest assured, and, mounted as she always is, I know of no other horses than theirs that can overtake her; why, rumor has it that she planned the Mad Colonel's attacks."

Major Malcolm checked himself, as he was about to make an angry retort; but said, quietly:

"Rumor does not always speak the truth, captain; and I believe the woman is another poor unfortunate, like this one here, whom this magnificent-looking devil led to destruction, and forced to aid him in his wild deeds."

"For her own sake I trust you are right, for I cannot understand a woman's falling to the level of man's nature; but come, we must give these two burial in some quiet spot, and then, with the coming of day, discover what our capture amounts to; but certain it is, our border is free of this horde, and our next blow must be against that red fiend, Black Kettle."

The call of the bugle quickly brought the soldiers and settlers together, and, as the dawn approached the Mad Colonel and Rose Rossell were laid in one grave, and the other slain decently buried, after which the jubilant settlers and soldiers returned homeward, their horses laden with booty, and driving before them vast herds of horses and cattle they had found in the retreat of the Prairie Tigers.

CHAPTER XLI. CONCLUSION.

SEVERAL years have passed since the night attack upon the stronghold of the Prairie Tigers, and Eldorado City has grown to such an extent that it really has some pretensions to the name; but though the town is thriving, and the valley is filled with prosperous settlers, the Mad Colonel and his outlaw band are often the subject of conversation around the hearthstones of those cabin homes, and many an expedition of tourists has gone to the stronghold in the hills, and in gazing at the graves of the dead have listened in awe to the stories of these bygone early days, when every man carried his life in his hand.

And Hope Haven, the home of Major Malcolm, is a fine estate now, and is owned by Henry Maverick, who purchased it from its first owner, and who is now a wealthy cattle king.

And Major Malcolm? I hear the reader ask.

He dwells in Texas, on a ranch adjoining his son's estate; but the major, who is a widower now, spends little time at home, as he is constantly visiting the fort to see his daughter Maud, who is now Mrs. Colonel Loyd Carleton, for the gallant soldier won her, after she had buried forever in her heart her love for Fancy Frank.

But one day she solved the secret of why he had left her so strangely, for out riding alone one day she passed near a lonely grave she had often seen, and been touched by what had been skillfully carved with a knife in the head-board; it was simply:

"POOR BESSIE."

Now, as she approached the spot, she beheld a man standing with folded arms by the side of the grave.

She would have checked her horse and ridden quietly away, but his quick ear detected the footfall, and he turned quickly.

At a glance each knew the other, and from the lips of each broke a name:

"Frank Powell!"

"Maud Malcolm!"

"No, Doctor Powell, I am Mrs. Carleton now, but I welcome you with the same kindly friendship as of yore," she said, frankly, extending her hand, which he grasped warmly, and still holding, said:

"Maud, I came to this country for two reasons: first, to visit this grave, as a duty I owed to poor Bessie Ray, my girl-sweetheart in the long ago, and who was murdered by the hand of Harvey Vertner; second, I only of late knew a secret that hit me hard, for I had not before suspected it; and knowing it, after what had passed between you and I, it was but just that I should tell you why I left you that night so long ago.

"It was the night we left for the attack on the Prairie Tigers' stronghold, and I sought your home to see you, and also to tell your father of the intended expedition.

"I saw you, Maud, through the open window, and I saw you in the arms of the one I knew as Ross Elliott—"

"It was an assumed name, and she was a woman."

"I know it now; would to God I had then."

"I knew her sad secret, and we became as sisters to each other; but I am glad to know the secret of your strange desertion of me, and I do not blame you, but forgive you."

"Thank you; now, as in this grave lies my love for poor Bessie Ray, as deeply will I bury that I feel for you, now that you are the wife of another, and a brave and noble man, my friend."

"Frank Powell, you are a noble being; come, I see your horse, yonder, mount him and come home with me, for you will find many to welcome you."

"I am encamped over there with two comrades, who have clung to my fortunes; one of them is Dave Titus, the other I know only as Billy Buttons, and he was a simple boy who left the Prairie Tiger band with me, but in whom there is no harm; but I will go with you, for we are friends now."

"Yes, Frank, friends until death us do part," and Maud's voice trembled as she again held forth her hand, which Powell grasped warmly, and, bending over, imprinted a kiss upon it, to hide a tear that dropped from his eyes.

Shortly after Maud rode into the fort, with Fancy Frank by her side, and behind them came Dave Titus, once known as Angel Dave, but who had become a reformed man, and Billy Buttons, his inseparable companion.

A warm welcome awaited Powell from the commandant, Colonel Carleton, and shortly after, having assigned Dave and Billy Buttons to comfortable quarters in the fort, the colonel, his lovely wife and their guest rode over to Prairie Rest, Harold Malcolm's happy home, for indeed most happy was he whom men once called the Man of the Iron Face, with Violet Vassar as his beautiful bride, and a bevy of tiny images of their parents growing up around them, the joy of their grandfather's life.

After a long visit among his Texas friends, Fancy Frank and his two "pards" wended their way northward once more, and are still living, as many who read these pages may know.*

And Nina Malcolm, she that was the Black Specter?

Retired from the world into a convent's walls, where she has buried forever every passion of her heart, and the sad secret that she had lived through sorrows and dangers untold, to become in the bitter end, the *Nemesis of the Plains*.

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